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Kingdom Hearts: 358/2 Days - Volume 03

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Character Information and Prologue

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Illustration: Amano Shiro

Translations: Goldpanner

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Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days Vol 3: Xion- Seven Days

Characters

Axel

The Organisation's number VIII. He carried out life in the Organisation while having a sworn goal with Saïx, but seeing the distress of his friends Roxas and Xion deepen, he went to investigate how to resolve things, and accidentally figured out the mystery of Xion. He's stressing as he tries to find a way for the three of them to go in a good direction.

Xion

A girl who appeared as the 14th member. She uses a Keyblade like Roxas, and has no memories of before becoming a Nobody. After making a promise with Roxas and Axel for the three of them to go to the beach, she disappeared without telling either of them why.

Roxas

Number XIII of the Organisation, and the protagonist of this story. Unlike the other Organisation members he has no memories of his human time, and he is a special Nobody that can use a Keyblade, which makes him worry about the mystery of his own existence. Stressing about the secrets Xion is keeping and the

change he sees in his close friend Axel, his days are unstable.

Riku

For the sake of his close friend Sora, and in order to right his past wrongs, he is battling to control the darkness inside himself. Having entrusted Sora to Naminé in the haunted mansion and gone to search for the Organisation, he encounters Xion and notices the truth.

Naminé

A Nobody who can manipulate memory. In order to bring Sora's memory back to normal, the girl is living in Twilight Town's haunted mansion. Having begun to notice the true nature of Xion, she is anxious about the future that is to come.

The King (Mickey Mouse)

The great King of Disney Castle, and Riku's close friend. He journeys in order to guide all the worlds with light. Along the way he noticed the existence of the Organisation, and is paying attention to them.

Xigbar

Number II, who handles the Gun Arrow. One of the only elders of the group, he is shrewd, and is well versed with many pieces of information. He says things that make us think he knows about the mystery of Xemnas, Axel and Saix's goal, and the true nature of Xion.

Xemnas

Leader of the Organisation and Xehanort's Nobody. He is watching over the succession of hardships that befall Roxas and Xion in a detached manner, saying that everything is according to plan. It seems that his goal is to guide Kingdom Hearts to completion, but his true motives are still a mystery.

Saix

Number VII, who serves as adjutant of the Organisation. While sharing a common goal with Axel, he is involved in the performance of each of the Organisation's duties, but he is also trying to put distance between Roxas and Xion.

I wonder how many days it's been since we were last called to the Round Room.

Roxas was sitting in the usual chair, waiting for Xemnas to appear.

Half of the 13 seats in the row are empty. Axel's sitting in his chair, arms crossed. He looks unhappy. Looks like Xion's still to come. Come to think of it, Xion doesn't have a chair, thought Roxas. Maybe she'll sit in one of the empty seats. If she does, I wonder whose she'll take?

The air in the room wavered, and Xemnas' figure appeared.

But Xion hasn't arrived yet, thought Roxas, and that moment, Xemnas opened his mouth.

"Xion has gone."

Upon hearing words that unexpected, Roxas just stared at Xemnas. It seemed the other members were just as surprised.

But, why—why would she be gone?

"What does this mean? So it's desertion?" Demyx asked, shrugging.

"How absurd... You're saying they chose the path of annihilation?" Xaldin continued.

There's no way she would desert. No way. She had to have some kind of reason. Maybe that fake in the Organisation coat did something terrible to her again... Thoughts whirled round and round inside his head, appearing and disappearing. What do I do, what should I do...

Xemnas' words interrupted his thoughts.

"I forbid anyone from going after Xion."

"Why!" Roxas yelled impulsively. Why can't I go after her?

Xemnas looked at Roxas for a moment, but he didn't say anything in answer. Saïx opened his mouth instead. "It simply means that it's best left alone. Are you dissatisfied?"

"Shouldn't someone go and bring her back?!" Roxas said in a strong tone.

But, the answer from Saïx was but one cold line.

“Why bring it back?”

Upon hearing that, Roxas couldn’t immediately form an answer. I just wanted things to be like they have been so far.

But, even if I said that, Saïx wouldn’t give his consent.

While Roxas hesitated, Xemnas began to speak slowly and admonishingly. “If the time comes, everything will be made clear.”

Axel, who had been sitting in silence with his arms crossed the whole time, looked up. “So if the time doesn’t come, everything will stay like this.”

Saïx glared at him. “The order is absolute. To defy it means annihilation,” he answered.

Xemnas’ figure disappeared. And then, one by one the other members all vanished, until only Axel and Roxas were left in the Round Room.

“...Axel—”

“Mission, c’mon,” said Axel, as if to stop Roxas from speaking about Xion, and then he vanished.

That’s...

Xion’s been strange for a long time now. But now that I think about it, Axel’s... also seemed strange. It feels like everyone but me knew something about what was happening to Xion.

Roxas looked down, and stared at the centre of the room.

This is where I first met Xion. That time—what kind of expression did she have...? I’m trying to remember, but I can’t. Like something that happened a long, long time ago.

Today is the 256th day since I joined the Organisation. I counted just yesterday, so I do know. So, since Xion came on the 7th day, it’s been 249 days, definitely.

Roxas sighed once, and left the room to follow Axel.

xxx

Continue to [Chapter 1: Nostalgia Island](#)

Chapter 1: Nostalgia Island

Written by: Kanemaki Tomoco

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xxx

This white room is kind of like Castle Oblivion, thought Riku as he sat down on one of the chairs that were set out.

He was in a room inside the building known as the haunted mansion, which lay on the outskirts of Twilight Town.

And, on the other side of the table sat a blonde girl. Her name was Naminé.

And, the name of a girl with different-coloured hair, sleeping in a certain place, was Xion.

The two girls have more points in common than just appearance. Yeah. They've both cooperated with the Organisation in the past.

"So we were able to meet again," said Naminé.

"Do you remember our promise?" Riku asked.

"I do—I made that promise about Sora, didn't I." Naminé looked down. Her sketchbook lay at the end of her gaze. "I'm sorry," she said in a small voice.

"Maybe I can't keep my promise."

"What the hell is happening?"

"There aren't enough of Sora's memories," Naminé answered, her gaze staying wandering around the table.

Take care of Sora for me.

That was the promise that Naminé had made with Riku at Castle Oblivion, many months before. Naminé the 'memory witch' was the only person with the

special power to unchain and reconnect the memories that had once been rewritten there in Sora.

I'm sure Naminé once said that memories never disappear. That it would take a while, but after that he'd be back to normal. "What do you mean?" There aren't enough memories? What the hell does that mean?

"Sora's memories are flowing out through his Nobody...," said Naminé, as if speaking to herself. She finally looked at Riku. "More and more of Sora's memories are being absorbed by her," she said in a clear voice. She spoke the truth.

'Her'—that's Xion. In that place right now, Xion is sleeping. I don't know whether that's an effect the memories of Sora flowing into her have had on her body.

"So you can't just put Sora's memories back to normal?" Riku probed.

"If they still exist as fragments of memory, I think I could take them back..." Naminé's gaze fell once more to the table. "But, if her own memories mix together and connect with fragments of Sora's memory, it will take a long time to put back, just like with Sora right now. And if I do that, it will take even longer to wake Sora up—and there's no way DiZ would allow that."

Naminé was staring at a picture drawn in her sketchbook. Riku couldn't really see what it was from where he sat.

"Can anything be done?"

"If her memories recombine, when Sora wakes up, maybe there won't be a single person who knows him. I couldn't do a thing like that. Her memories include the fake memories created at Castle Oblivion, Sora's own memories, and memories that have flowed in from various things, all mixing together. I can't tell which memories are the right ones, and which aren't."

If we give Sora's awakening top priority, everything else can't help but be sacrificed, I guess. But, even so... is there really nothing that can be done, I wonder. Do two individuals really have to be sacrificed for Sora's sake, I wonder. DiZ would definitely say that Nobodies aren't individuals or anything. But, now that I've gone and gotten involved, I don't want to do these things. Like

annihilate Xion, having that face and all.

“It’s already too late. Sora’s awakening is already going to be much later than planned. Sora’s Nobody and that being that absorbs memories have both gone and gained a self awareness that we didn’t predict. Maybe... it’s already a fact. If they aren’t destroyed, Sora can’t wake up.”

Naminé showed Riku her sketchbook. She had drawn three people wearing Organisation coats. *The red-haired guy I met just now at Castle Oblivion. The other blond-haired one is Sora’s Nobody, who I haven’t met yet, and the black-haired person is Xion.*

“Originally, her face wasn’t visible. But, now I can see it clearly.”

For her face to have been originally unable to see... I wonder what that would mean.

Before Riku could ask, Naminé continued. “I think it’s proof that she is being filled with Sora’s memories. The memories of Sora and of his Nobody, and also her own... There’s no longer any other way... to bring all of this mess together.” Naminé closed her mouth.

No longer any other way... but, still. “I understand,” Riku replied, standing. And then, he left the room behind him.

xxx

I don’t know when I fainted. When I woke up, I was in this very quiet room. But it’s a kind of lonely room.

Xion got up, and shook her head slowly. There was no-one in the room.

I must have—yeah, I collapsed in Castle Oblivion. I found out about myself in that castle. My true identity—

My...

I—wasn’t me. I wasn’t anyone. But, well then, who am I?

Then, Xion REMEMBERED where this place was.

This place—I know it, Hollow Bastion. The world where Riku and Sora fought. And, this is the little room that Riku used during the time he spent under

Maleficent. I remember. I absolutely remember what happened the first day I came to this world. About Riku, about Sora, everything.

Xion got out of bed and left the room.

So, Xion—where do you think we should go from here?

xxx

Today is the 257th day, and the 2nd day since Xion left.

Today is the 258th day, and the 3rd day since Xion left.

I know I have to do something, but I don't know what.

Roxas sat at the usual place, arms wrapped around his knees. He hadn't brought ice cream.

Axel's not coming. Maybe he's avoiding me. I don't know why he would, but the fact that he's not coming here when things are like this gives me no choice but to think so.

I didn't hear anything about Xion leaving the Organisation, but maybe Axel did. I should ask him directly, but I'm scared for some reason. I can't even go to his room. I wonder why something like that would be scary.

Doing nothing but wondering what on earth to do, days passed for Roxas.

Today is the 262nd day, and the 7th day since Xion left.

Every day is just moving past. All I really know is the date. I don't really remember what I did on my missions. I feel terribly hazy somehow. I can't gather my thoughts. I dream.

Of course I don't remember what I dreamed about. Not just dreams; I can't remember anything. I know I'm not remembering. It feels like something is wrong with me somehow, but. But, I don't really understand that, either. Xion's not here. I can't see Axel either. That's why I don't understand.

Since I just dream and dream, even though it's my own self doing it, I'm never really sure whether I am asleep or not. It even feels like. Maybe everything is a dream.

Am I hazy because I haven't slept well? Or am I hazy all day, which is why I

don't sleep well? Even during missions I'm so sleepy. Not sleepy. It feels like my head is always full of fog—just like I'm always in the twilight.

xxx

At the Round Room were the usual three: Xemnas, Xigbar, and Saïx.

"It is necessary to further reinforce Roxas' memories while Xion is gone," said Xemnas.

"The arrangements are all settled," answered Saïx.

Xigbar snorted at him. "How do you see Xion?"

"What do you mean?"

Vague words. A clear will is the only thing of any importance, Saïx was thinking.

Xigbar grinned in reply, and asked Xemnas this time. "It doesn't matter if you get the meaning. What about you?" Xemnas looked at Xigbar. "Don't you and me sometimes see eye to eye, as they say?" Xigbar said, shrugging, and Xemnas smiled.

Is that a yes, or a no?

"Keep an eye on Roxas." Without answering Xigbar, Xemnas made himself disappear.

"Yeah, do your best now." Xigbar followed after.

I wonder what on earth Xigbar was trying to say...

xxx

Xion wandered the worlds like a vagrant, Riku following her the entire time. And then—she reached a familiar world.

Riku felt his heart start to pound slightly faster.

He sniffed at the smell of the salt water. The sound of waves—the blue sea and the blue sky. The homeland he had thrown away one year ago...

I hadn't thought I'd come back here like this, with no time to prepare my heart.

Xion was stumbling towards the shoreline.

Riku cast his gaze towards the horizon. This was Destiny Islands. The ocean of his homeland.

You destroyed your homeland!

Words flitted through his mind, ones Zexion had thrown at him in Castle Oblivion.

I did come home once, to a fake Destiny Islands in castle Oblivion. I saw Wakka then, and Selphie, and Tidus. Kairi, of course, and Naminé too. But that was an illusion made from memory.

Feeling a slight headache, Riku pressed his temples.

Xion turned, as if she felt something. And that face—

His headache went splitting.

The waves dissolved Xion's footprints.

The waves washed away some sand, revealing a shell.

It was a thalassa shell.

So that even if someone becomes lost on the journey, we'll definitely be able to come home to the same place.

That's the keepsake for journeys.

Xion picked up the shell.

Just then, Riku felt someone's presence. Xion turned.

"...Roxas!" Xion said in a small voice. It was the name belonging to the silhouette that had appeared. She made one step forwards, hesitated, and then hid herself in the shadow of a rock.

That boy that's appeared on the beach is wearing a black coat like us—that's Roxas... Sora's Nobody. Riku checked the boy's figure. *I can't really tell if he looks like Sora from here.*

Roxas picked up the shell that Xion had dropped.

At that moment, Xion said "—Ah...," in a small voice. She pressed her hands to

her head.

“...Xion?”

Xion’s body collapsed onto the sand, and Riku rushed over instantly, to take her up in his arms.

xxx

At the sound of my voice, a boy opens his eyes. No... was it me who opened my eyes?

I had the feeling that I’d talked with someone on the edge of this island, where that girl was sitting before, so I came here. But, I don’t really understand. I... was a boy? Or someone other than that?

Who on earth am I?

I want to watch the sun sink into the sea on the edge of that island, the three of us together.

We promised.

That we’d all go to the beach.

Don’t forget, Roxas.

xxx

The mission he’d been ordered to take was to investigate a new world. It was a place he’d never been—and a world he’d never seen.

Usually, going to unknown places isn’t something I hate. But right now, I don’t really know.

Roxas narrowed his eyes at the world that unfolded on the other end of the dark corridor.

Blue sea—bright, clear sky. This world is called... must be... oh yeah, Destiny Islands. It’s kind of a strange place, thought Roxas, as he walked to where the waves lapped at the shore. The tip of his toe bumped against something. It was a shell.

It’s the same shape as the one I got from Xion. Maybe Xion’s also been to this world? The ocean... maybe this is the beach we were all going to go to together.

Just then, he saw a shadowy figure on the pier used to cross over to a little island to his left.

A black shadowy figure—a coat.

Xion?

Roxas broke into a run.

“Xion!” he yelled, now above the beach.

Xion turned, hood still up, and then she put her hands on it. From under it was revealed—Zexion.

Why? Shouldn't he have been annihilated? What is Zexion doing in a place like this?

“The truth is, you should have known it would turn out like this,” Zexion stated.

“What do you mean!” came a sudden voice from behind, and Roxas turned. There was a silver-haired boy that Roxas didn't know.

Zexion was speaking to the boy. “Before you reached this place, you travelled through many worlds of your memories. But, beings of darkness should have been all you met there.”

My head hurts.

Hurts like it's splitting.

The silver-haired boy glared at Zexion. “In your heart, there is nothing left but memories of darkness. The memories of your homeland—have disappeared.”

“You're lying! I remember everyone just fine! All my... my... important friends.”

The boy is... screaming. No... the screaming is... coming from... who? Me? Xion...?

“Who was the one who threw all those friends away?” said Zexion.

Like I'd throw my friends away.

“Did you forget your own actions?”

Like I'd forget.

“You destroyed your homeland!”

Like I'd destroy anything—!! But, I don't know. Maybe I did destroy my homeland. My homeland—where is that? Do I have a homeland? The sound of waves is loud and annoying. My head hurts.

xxx

“By any chance... Riku...?” murmured Naminé, looking up at the pod in which Sora slept.

Memories are flowing out of Sora, and at the same time, fragments of memory are coming back into him. I sense a great number of memory fragments. One—no, way more.

Fragments of memory of so many people—There, Riku memories are also mixed in. I have handled Riku memories once before, when I copied those memories into the Replica, so I recognise them.

Why is she absorbing even Riku memories? What on earth is happening?

And, you—what on earth is she?

xxx

Riku held Xion's fallen body quietly in his arms. It seemed as if she had lost consciousness.

Riku's head hurt, which was making him frown.

What's with this pain...? Just before, when I remembered Zexion's words, the slight headache I was feeling got horribly worse; the pain got remarkably strong. I'd never felt a pain like that before, and it made me fade out of consciousness for a moment. What's happening?

“Who... on earth... am I...?” Xion said in a small voice, her eyes still closed.

Feeling uneasy, Riku pulled his blindfold up a little and looked at Xion. For a moment, Xion's face... looked like someone else's.

That's not Naminé or Kairi, that's, that person.

In that hallucination-like instant, Riku's headache receded critically.

What the hell is this?

Just then, Riku looked up at the sound of running footsteps on the pier. He saw Roxas' running figure disappear into a dark corridor.

xxx

The three of us are watching the sunset. We promised to go to the beach, right? See, that's why—right? Xion watched the setting sun sink into the horizon. Roxas was beside her, and so was Axel. They were wrapped in the sound of waves. *The three of us watched the sunset like this some time ago, didn't we. But, I know. This is an illusion. It's just a dream, showing me what I want.*

"Am I not supposed to exist?" she asked, in a small voice.

"What do you want to do, Xion?" Axel asked. Xion thought for a little.

This has to be the first time I've been asked, and come to see the answer.

"I... want to be with you two." Yes. I only want to be with the two of them. But I'm irregular, I'm a fake. I don't even have the right to be an Organisation member.

"Then come back," Roxas said.

I'd want to, if I could. "But.... I can't go back, not like this. Hey, how could I become the same as the two of you?"

Roxas and Axel gazed at the sunset, without answering her question.

xxx

Xion stirred in Riku's arms. He had never intended to actually come into contact with her like this, or save her like this. He had only intended to give this person called Xion who affected Sora's memories a little help in leaving the Organisation. And, he had intended to keep an eye on what Xion was doing.

I never thought that I'd make contact with her in this place—the island of my homeland.

"You are...?" Xion asked, sounding pained. After hesitating a little over how to answer, Riku decided to tell the truth.

"Riku—Sora's friend."

"...Sora? You know Sora?"

“Yeah.” Riku helped Xion stand.

“...Thank you,” Xion said, and Riku shrugged slightly. He wasn’t used to being told that.

“You saved me? Why?”

“Well—why, I wonder,” said Riku evasively, listening carefully to the sound of the waves. *This sound never changes. The sound of the waves—the sound of the tide.*

Xion looked at the edge of the island, and then she opened her mouth. “Can I ask? About the... the girl who is always with Sora.”

“Kairi, then.” Saying her name made Riku’s chest hurt a little.

“Kairi... the girl who looks so much like me.”

“She’s someone Sora really treasures,” Riku answered, looking out at the horizon. It hadn’t even been one year yet, but that day they’d talked on this beach felt like a terribly long time ago.

“I remember about Sora and Kairi. I’m a doll that was created, but I have these memories that I shouldn’t. What on earth... are these memories?” Riku gazed at the waves without answering. “Where is Sora now?”

“That’s something I won’t tell anyone,” Riku replied.

“Why...?” Xion asked, and then Riku resolved to tell her everything.

If Xion was born from Sora’s memories, then Xion is one piece of the whole Sora. It feels wrong to lie to that.

“You... Your memories are made from Sora’s memories.”

“I’m from Sora’s memories...?”

Xion looked down. The waves were wetting her feet.

“Apparently the scattered fragments of Sora’s memories are flowing into you. Right now, Sora is sleeping so that he can have his memories reconnected—but.”

Riku went to continue, but Xion turned and looked up. “Those fragments have flowed into me... and so, Sora can’t wake up...”

“Yeah—that’s right. If I take you to him right now, the memories belonging to Sora that are inside you can definitely be taken out and returned,” Riku said.

Xion looked away for a second, but then she turned and looked at Riku. “...Do you hate me, for robbing you of your friend?”

“No... I’m just sad,” Riku answered. *What I’ve come to understand from actually talking to Xion—is that Xion is a girl who makes me think of Sora, and of the Kairi inside Sora. That’s why I can’t hate her. I can only be sad.*

“I’m sorry. But, I can’t go away now. I have friends that are very important to me.”

Friends...

Riku used his conscience to ponder those words. *The strength to frankly and clearly state what’s in one’s heart. That’s a strength of Sora’s.*

“If so,” Riku replied, “you need time to think. Think, Xion. About where you really should return.”

“Where I... should return?” Xion hung her head again. *Her wavering, and her distress, is just like Sora’s too.*

“I wonder if I... really can think of the right answer.”

“Whether your thinking is correct is not something for only you to decide, you know. You and your friends should think of a way to make the situation good for everyone.”

I guess this is just sophistry. No, there’s no reason for it to be, thought Riku looking out at the horizon once more. The sun, already sinking, was dying the ocean red.

“I understand... Thank you, Riku,” said Xion, finally showing a small smile.

xxx

I should resign myself to it soon.

Axel bit his ice cream, staring vaguely out at the setting sun.

What should I do? What do I want to do? Feels like that’s all I’ve been thinking about for a long time.

Built replicas, and non-existent Nobodies. We aren't that different, thought Axel, and he sighed. Hearts don't exist for Nobodies. We have a self. A self that is controlled by memories. I've been thinking lately, if all my actions are controlled by memories, then perhaps I'm not controlled only by my human memories, but also the memories of yesterday, and the memories from an instant ago. It's probably just that the memories from those human days, when there was a heart, are overly vivid.

What do I want to do? And, what am I supposed to do? I don't really know whether bringing Xion back to the Organisation would be the best thing for her. Though of course, the answer to that is something that would be decided while eating ice cream here.

The evidence—look here.

"It's... been a while," said Roxas, sounding surprised, and Axel turned with a smile.

"Has it?" *Roxas expression is kind of absentminded. That's to be expected, I guess.*

Roxas sat down next to him like usual, and opened his mouth. "Today... I went to the beach on a mission." He took a bite of his ice cream. "I think I saw a girl who looked a lot like Xion..."

Axel stared at Roxas. Roxas' eyes were a little glazed.

"But, maybe it was my imagination... I don't really know. Dunno if today's mission was even real..." Roxas bit his ice cream again. "I feel like I just woke up."

It looks like Xion's disappearance has had an effect on Roxas.

Roxas kept speaking, without looking at Axel. "We promised before, didn't we? That the three of us would go to the beach next holidays."

"Yeah."

"Maybe that's why... it felt like Xion was at the beach today."

Roxas stared at the setting sun.

I should—resign myself, shouldn't I... Definitely.

Axel stood up leisurely, and stretched wide. Then he said, "...Shall we go look for her?"

"Huh?"

Roxas finally looked at Axel. Axel smiled at him.

"Tomorrow, after our missions, let's look for Xion before we come here."

"Mm... yes, let's do that!" Roxas nodded, and stood up like Axel. Then he smiled.

I wonder when the day will come that the three of us will go to the beach...
Axel thought suddenly, seeing that smile, and to deny the next thought that floated up, he stared at the sun.

xxx

Continue to [Chapter 2: Quickening Memory](#)

Chapter 2: Quickening Memory

Written by: Kanemaki Tomoco

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Xion stared at the wall, hugging her knees.

This world is horribly quiet.

I'm in a little room inside a big castle. The room that Riku spent time in back then.

This is Hollow Bastion.

Since I left the Organisation, this room is where I've been sleeping. I don't really know how many days it's been. Every two or three days, Riku pokes his head in here for me.

I haven't really been dreaming anymore. But, I remember the dream I had that day. The dream I had on Destiny Islands.

The dream where the three of us went to the beach together, and watched the sunset. I want to be with those two—that's all I wish for. What can I do to become the same as them, I wonder. If we started from such different places, maybe we can't ever be the same.

I wonder what I should do.

Xion stared at her fingers, then took off her gloves.

White fingers.

That reminds me, I haven't looked in the mirror for a while. When I was in the Organisation, I looked in the mirror every night. I wonder, what would I look like to myself now?

Roxas sighed.

He was inside the cave in Agrabah. While on his mission, he had taken the opportunity to venture deep inside the cavern, looking for Xion.

But, he didn't find her. In all the worlds he'd been to so far, there hadn't been a single Xion-like sign at all. There was no sign of the fake organisation member that she'd been chasing, either.

Roxas swung the Keyblade down on the Heartless that appeared.

I've been able to sleep properly since the day we decided to look for Xion. The world looks bright and vivid, like the blank and hazy days since Xion left were just a lie.

I wonder what the hell all that was about. The days in which I'd only counted the dates—and every day was spent blank and hazy. I had thought that the world went foggy just because Xion wasn't there, but she's still not here now. I wonder what's changed.

The only difference between then and now is that we decided to search for Xion. Would that really make such a difference? I don't really know.

I guess spending days simply following orders means that I won't remember those days clearly. I'm definitely going to different worlds, but the things I'm doing don't change much. But it feels like that's not all.

Also, I don't really know why Xion left the Organisation either. Whether she failed a mission, or maybe something happened with Saïx? Maybe something is happening to Xion someplace I don't know. Xion's condition had definitely been a little strange. Strange, but I really don't think it was enough to make her have to leave the Organisation. I wonder why—why, Xion.

There are so many things I don't know. It pisses me off.

Roxas stared at his own hand, gripping the Keyblade.

It makes me uneasy. I'm thinking about how maybe I'll never see Xion again.

I'll try another world tomorrow.

The mission I've been assigned today is, again, to find the fake Organisation member—Riku. It's been that same old, same old lately. I'd expected that I'd be sent on a mission to search for Xion in top secrecy, but, happily or not, I haven't received such a mission from Saïx at all.

Axel stared at Neverland's ocean, and stretched out wide.

I can't feel Riku or Xion's presence on this world, either.

I wonder how on earth the Organisation are planning to deal with Xion. What if she intends to look for the Hero's location while they let her wander free like this? Do they... know where Xion is...? If they did, then they probably wouldn't send me out to look for Riku's whereabouts, would they.

Axel still hadn't reported that Xion was with Riku, even to Saïx. As to why, he was asking himself the same question.

That's why I could suggest to Roxas that we look for her, though. That's resolution, and resignation, and then what? Friendship? Axel's mouth twisted, remembering that word. I'm still unsure somehow.

I'm worrying over what is the best thing to do. Will I find the answer someday?

Roxas and Axel sat side by side, staring out blankly at the sunset. The usual place—the clock tower in Twilight Town.

Roxas sighed heavily. "Looks like it's no good..." he muttered.

They'd searched many worlds, but they hadn't found her after all.

"Isn't there anywhere we haven't looked yet?"

"I've looked everywhere I can go," Roxas replied, staring at his fingers. *There are places I haven't been yet—places I've never been. Maybe that's the kind of place Xion went. That reminds me...*

A name floated up in Roxas' mind. "...The only place I haven't been is Castle Oblivion."

Axel turned his face to Roxas, and Roxas stared at Axel.

Yeah, that's right. I remember talking about Castle Oblivion with Xion before. How did I forget until now?

"Xion wanted to know what was at Castle Oblivion," Roxas said, without thinking. Axel's eyebrow twitched, and he frowned slightly. Roxas kept speaking. "Also, the day before Xion left, she was given a very important mission, that's what you said, wasn't it Axel? When you have important missions sometimes, Axel, you have to go to Castle Oblivion, right? So Xion also—"

"...But there's nothing over there now," said Axel, interrupting Roxas' words and train of thought alike.

Even so..., thought Roxas, trying to continue, and just then Axel spoke.

"...I hear Xion was born at Castle Oblivion."

"Huh?" Roxas' breath was suddenly knocked out.

"That's probably why she wanted to know what was over there."

Roxas looked down. "I didn't... know that." *Xion didn't tell me that. Not only Xion, Axel too—*

"I... only just found out myself," said Axel.

"Castle Oblivion...", Roxas murmured. *I wonder if Xion knew for a long time that she was born there. Xion and I don't have human-era memories. Our memories from when we were born as Nobodies are vague, too. So, that's probably why Xion wanted to know about that time.*

I've never talked to Xion about it. Maybe, Xion was suffering about it alone. Friends help each other when they are in trouble, but I couldn't do anything for Xion.

The setting sun shone on Roxas, who sat with his head down.

xxx

I dreamed for the first time in a while. It was of Castle Oblivion. I wonder whose dream this is?

No, maybe it wasn't a dream, thought Xion, opening her eyes slowly.

I still don't know concretely what is in that Castle. I have the feeling that I have to go there. There's definitely a secret in that castle.

XXX

Axel rolled over in the bed in his room, and stared up blankly at the ceiling.

There's still some time before I have to go to the lobby.

Yesterday, I lied to Roxas. I decided to tell only one lie, but, now that I've lied, even when I tell the truth, the lie keeps following me around.

On top of that, even it was really necessary to tell Roxas that Xion was born in Castle Oblivion, I regret it now.

But I don't want to lie to Roxas, and that thought is important. It's just like a human, Axel thought. Lies—No, maybe in this case it's hiding things. I can't tell Roxas about Xion's true nature yet. No, I think it's something I can never tell him.

Amidst that, I hold the faint hope that things can be brought to a state in which Roxas and Xion can be allowed to exist at the same time.

A state in which they are allowed to exist—the thought made Axel smile bitterly. Nobodies aren't allowed to exist in the first place. Nobodies are originally 'beings that don't exist', after all. So why would I be thinking such things?

Xion and Castle Oblivion—and Riku. That castle is special.

If I go there with Roxas, maybe there's something that can be learned.

Axel sat up in bed.

If I don't act by myself, then nothing will change. That's how it feels.

If I've told one lie, then after that, no matter how many lies I tell it's the same. For taking Roxas to Castle Oblivion, then I should go with there being a powerful enemy having showed up at that castle.

A powerful enemy—in other words, the fake Organisation member, Riku.

XXX

Head full of Castle Oblivion, for the first time in a while, Roxas didn't sleep well.

He headed for the lobby a little later than usual.

After the mission, it would be good to have a lot of time to look for Xion, but only a little will do.

Arriving in the lobby, Roxas saw Axel and Saïx were talking about something.

“The fake Organisation member has showed up again?” Saïx said, and Roxas stopped walking.

“You mean...,” Roxas asked.

“Seems like he’s hanging around Castle Oblivion,” answered Saïx.

The words were out before he could think. “...I’ll go.”

If I meet the fake Organisation member, then I can ask about Xion, and more than anything, I want to go see Castle Oblivion. If I go to this same Castle that Xion wanted to visit, maybe I can learn something.

“Your opponent is a fairly strong enemy. You couldn’t go alone.”

Saïx’s gaze is cold. But, that doesn’t mean I’ll give up now.

When he went to push further, Axel spoke quietly. “There’s no problem if I go too then, right?”

Saïx looked at Axel in silence. His gaze was almost reproachful.

“I *am* the member who knows the most about the Castle here, after all,” Axel went on to say, grinning.

“...Whatever. The two of you are to go eliminate the fake Organisation member at Castle Oblivion,” said Saïx.

Roxas met Axel’s eyes, and they nodded.

Maybe with this, we’ll get a little closer to Xion.

xxx

Riku walked through a dark corridor, holding Xion up.

Xion had said she wanted to return to Castle Oblivion one more time.

In this Realm of In-between, Castle Oblivion is in an even more in-between type of place—‘another level,’ perhaps it can be called.

Right now, I am trying to grant Xion's wishes to the best of my ability. That's because I think maybe if I do that, then I'll come to see what I should do.

A strangely shaped castle rose up beyond the darkness.

Is it just my imagination that I get the feeling that this castle has changed shape since I met Xion here, and since I first came here?

Xion stared up at the castle.

"Are you feeling okay?" Riku called to her back, sensing her body tremble.

"I'm okay," she replied, and pulled the hood of her coat right up. He couldn't tell what her expression was like.

Even so, thought Riku. Why on earth was this castle made in the first place...?

xxx

"So this is Castle Oblivion..."

Roxas was looking up at the strange building.

It's the first time I've been to this place—this world. Can this be called a 'world'? It's like an extension of the Real of In-between, thought Roxas. This is where Xion was born, and also where many Organisation members were annihilated.

"What on earth is here?"

"What' ...? Research facilities."

"Research facilities? For what?"

"For what, I wonder... Nobodies and Heartless, I guess, lots of things."

"What did you do here, Axel?"

At the third question, Axel's expression became troubled. He tilted his head.
"Investigation—I guess?"

"What do you mean, you guess?" Roxas returned, unsatisfied.

Axel shrugged. "It's a secret."

When Axel says this, he never gives a proper answer. "...Whatever, I suppose. Is it okay to go in?"

“Of course. We came here on a mission, after all.”

Roxas opened the door. On the other side spread a floor that was very similar to the Organisation’s castle in which he lived.

He set one foot into the castle.

Just then—he got a strange sensation.

Like the world was warping—

Uummm behind me is Axel... right. You guys, you with your annoying quacking, and you there, with that relaxed way of talking, you are.... What the? What is this?

“Roxas?!”

With Axel’s worried voice, a sharp pain plunged into Roxas.

“My head... hurts...” Hurts like I’m being crushed. Not just my head. My chest hurts too. What’s happening?

“Are you okay? Let’s go back...”

I know Axel grabbed my arm to support me. But—

There’s no one here.

But I really did get the feeling that the people we’re looking for would be here...

When I saw this castle, I felt it too. That my important friend... was here.

My important friend—Xion.

“I’m okay. Maybe Xion is here.... Ugh...,” Roxas answered, but he was at his limit. He fell to his knees.

Painful. It hurts. I can’t breathe.

In this place, to find is to lose, and to lose is to find...

“What... is this...”

I don’t get it. Whose voice can I hear? Marluxia? Why can I hear Marluxia’s voice? And—who are you?

“Roxas!”

Axel’s arm was pretty much holding Roxas, supporting him.

Axel’s worried face—*that face, is warping.*

Many... things are flowing in. What is this? What is happening?

“We’re retreating.”

“Wait... just... a little more... just...”

It was no good. Roxas was fading out of consciousness.

Over already? How sloppy of you.

Whose voice is that?

It’s not over. Like it’d be over. I won’t lose.

“...Riku!”

Suddenly, Roxas snapped into consciousness. His head didn’t hurt anymore.

But what happened just then? I don’t understand.

“Are you okay?!”

Axel was peering into his face worriedly.

Did I pass out...? “What happened to me?”

“You suddenly collapsed. Don’t you remember?”

“I remember up until going into the castle,” Roxas answered, getting up. They were still in Castle Oblivion. *But... I don’t really remember much. My head feels kind of jumbled up, but I’m okay now.*

“Just rest a little more.” Axel looked worried.

“I’m okay. Deeper in—”

Just when Roxas went to head for a door that lay deeper in the room, he noticed some shadowy figures there.

Two black-coated people were looking at Roxas and Axel.

I don’t know who one is. But the other—

“...Xion?!”

Roxas ran in her direction. *There's no mistaking it, that's Xion.*

Xion took one step forwards, then began to move back. Behind her was—the darkness of In-between.

“Xion! Wait!”

Between Roxas and Xion, who had walked into the dark corridor, stood the other Organisation-coated person.

Roxas gripped the Keyblade in his hand. “...Don't get in my way!”

But, the person in the Organisation coat only stepped into the darkness of In-between after Xion. Roxas also chased after.

“Wait! Roxas!” Axel followed after too.

xxx

What do I do—I never thought I'd see Roxas at Castle Oblivion. Did I dream about Castle Oblivion yesterday because Roxas was thinking about it? I had no idea that we were that connected.

Xion ran.

I didn't know where to go, so I just headed for the usual place. Twilight Town.

She ran through the town.

At a dead end in the underpass, she tried to get her breathing under control.

What do I do—maybe if I.

“Do you want to go back?”

“—Huh?”

Xion turned and found Riku standing there.

“How should I know,” she said, in a small voice.

“Then come back. I'll take you.”

“But—”

“If you don't know, then it means it's still not the time.”

It's still not the time—Xion nodded, and opened up the darkness beside herself.

“...Thank you, Riku.”

And then, Xion disappeared once more.

xxx

He chased after the coated person.

Why are you running away, Xion.

Why—

He chased them through the darkness, and ended up in Twilight Town.

I know the person I'm chasing isn't Xion. I know, but, why—

It was all a jumble inside his head.

“Calm down, Roxas.”

I can hear Axel's voice. But how the hell am I meant to calm down?

“We've completely lost sight of them,” said Axel, putting his hand on Roxas' shoulder as Roxas panted heavily.

Roxas turned to him. “...Xion...”

“I don't think that was Xion,” said Axel, sounding weary.

When I ran after them so recklessly, Axel must have chased after me. He's panting pretty hard too.

“I think the one that ran off first was Xion...” *There's no mistaking it.*

“Well, we know nothing happened to her, so I guess she'll come home sooner or later.”

Axel's stupid words pulled at something in Roxas. “And when she comes home and is turned into a dusk?” he asked, turning on Axel unintentionally.

Axel sighed heavily. “It's not fixed that that's gonna happen.”

So what do I call this, then. Irritation—impatience.

“That man... why was Xion with him?”

Xion—by that guy.

Roxas bit his lip and looked down, clenching his fists.

XXX

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Chapter 3: Fracture

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xxx

Xion sat on top of the bed, hugging her knees. *This is no different to when I was in the Organisation. There's no way around it. I have to decide already.*

Yesterday, seeing Axel and Roxas again after so long made me happy. I was happy—but, I didn't know what to show on my face.

Xion looked up at the sound of a knock on the door.

"...Riku?"

"I'm coming in."

The door opened, to show Riku standing there.

"I went to Twilight Town," said Riku, walking over to the side of the bed.

"What do you mean?" she asked, looking up at him.

"I just told them where we are." Xion didn't really understand Riku's words. Noticing the odd look she gazed up at him with, he continued. "You already know there's not much time, don't you, Xion."

There's not much time left. But, I don't know what to do. Riku's not here to save me. The one Riku wants to save is—Sora. But, he's helping me for Sora's sake.

"All I can really do is give you time to decide on this very important matter. On top of that, there are limits. So, Xion, maybe it would be better for you to go back over there."

"...Go back..."

“You don’t have to give me an answer right away. But, there’s not much time. Knowing that, it should be easy to work out where you should spend the time you have left.”

“...Riku, I—”

Xion looked down again, lost in thought. Yes, yes that’s right... Riku wants to say that either way, the ‘returning’ part will be the same, so I should return to the Organisation before I do. The way things are, there’s a bad effect on both Roxas and Sora. I wonder why I’m so scared of returning to the Organisation. I’m not scared of Saïx and Xemnas. I’m—scared to face Roxas. But, I know that it can’t go on like this. I have to return—to the place I should return to.

XXX

My first thought on waking up, every time, is that I want to sleep more. Still, it’s not like I haven’t been sleeping, and it’s not like my stamina isn’t recovering.

It’s just, it’d be great if I could spend one day relaxing and sleeping, that’s all. My memories from my human time are probably to blame for that.

Even when morning comes, this world is dark. Outside the window, a heart-shaped moon floats in a sky as dark blue as it is at night.

Axel rolled over in bed. There was still a little time before he had to go to the lobby. Then, he remembered what had happened yesterday.

When Roxas passed out at Castle Oblivion, he called out Riku’s name. And, once when Xion passed out, she called out Sora’s name.

Did Roxas remember something at Castle Oblivion? Roxas shouldn’t know that Riku even exists, let alone his name. For him to call out that name, it can only mean one thing. Roxas’ human memories must have returned in some form.

But, on the other hand, I’m uneasy.

Maybe it was a mistake to take him there, knowing he might remember something. I took him there thinking we might find out where Xion is, but I didn’t think we’d meet the real thing. And, the other one, the man in the coat, was Riku—

I’ve come into contact with him at that castle so many times.

Axel thought he didn't really want to remember the things that had happened when Roxas was still new to the Organisation and Axel had gone to Castle Oblivion on a mission, and about the Replica doll. Because, it was none other than himself that had decided on where the Replica would go.

What the hell has changed since then? I don't know if it's me myself, or the Organisation, or something else entirely. But, something has definitely changed since those times.

The relationship between Roxas and Xion is something like a mirror, one reflecting the other. But, is that really all? Xion is a vessel that copies Roxas' 'abilities'.

Each Nobody gets their personality—their abilities—from their memories of their time as humans. What are abilities, anyway? I wonder why they occur.

When I think about it, the existence of memory is what comes to mind. We are bound according to those memories, and so, we get our abilities according to memories. If that's true, then it wouldn't be strange for Roxas and Xion to be linked according to those 'memories'.

Xion copies his abilities, and at the same time, she's absorbing even Roxas' memories into her body. But, is that really all?

Roxas called Riku's name at Castle Oblivion. I had thought that Roxas' memories had reacted to the special magnetic field in that Castle, but maybe I was wrong. Roxas' memories had all gone horribly vague.

"...It can't be, can it...," Axel muttered,

Is Xion really only copying Roxas' memories and abilities? That doubt floated up. In any case, it doesn't look like there's any way I can make that judgement on my own.

"...Such a pain in the ass," Axel muttered, the face of the person he should be informing of all this floating before him. It was so much fun back then. Why did it end up like this?

The heart I remember sizzles with pain. Breaking a friendship was this painful, was it? I lost my heart, so I don't really know.

“Still feel sluggish, but I’d better get up...”

Axel sat up and stretched widely, then he rolled his neck. To talk to Saïx, he would have to get to the lobby a little early.

Doesn’t look like I’ll spend today in a very nice mood either.

xxx

I don’t feel like I slept well. I knew it. Roxas sat up in bed, and rubbed his eyes. Between his eyebrows and deep in the very middle of his head felt heavy.

Yesterday—yesterday, I saw Xion. Why was she avoiding me? Why did she run away from me? I’m sure Axel noticed that it was her, too. Axel was certainly the one who said let’s go look for her. That’s why I looked as hard as I could. But, I get the feeling that Axel wasn’t as desperate to find her as I was.

Yesterday was like that, too. He wasn’t in that much of a hurry. It’s because Axel is a Nobody—because Axel hasn’t got a heart—that it isn’t that painful for him to have Xion gone, for sure. But then I should be the same. Why has it been so painful for me since Xion left? I think I’m sad. It’s like every day is vague, shrouded in an ash-coloured haze, and it’s like time is just passing, it’s no fun.

I don’t really know what’s going through Axel’s head while he looks for her. I don’t really understand Axel.

Roxas got out of bed, and did some simple preparation in front of the mirror.

I wonder if I’ll have time to look for Xion again today...

Shaking his head in order to clear the restless feeling inside his chest, he left the room.

He walked down the hallway, towards the lobby. And on the way, he saw—Axel and Saïx.

“So you’re telling me to do it?”

“Seeing as Xion and the black coated man have forged a connection, there’s no other way.”

What an interesting conversation. Roxas got closer to them, but the moment they noticed him they stopped talking.

“...Axel?” Roxas said unconsciously, and Axel averted his eyes.

Why did he look away? Were they saying something they didn't want me to hear?

Not knowing how to continue, Roxas was lost for a moment, but then Saïx spoke first.

“Xion betrayed us.”

“Huh...?!”

The words knocked his breath out. But, Saïx had a follow-up hit. “You saw her moving with the fake Organisation member too, didn't you? It's a clear act of betrayal.”

“Just because she was with him doesn't mean she has betrayed us!” Roxas yelled, reflexively.

Why the hell would just moving with him mean betrayal, that's, that's—there's no way. He looked at Axel automatically. But, Axel's eyes were still averted, and he stayed silent. *Why won't you say something for me, Axel?*

“That's just what you want to think, isn't it,” said Saïx, sounding fed up.

“Maybe she's being threatened by that guy...,” muttered Roxas, and Saïx snorted.

“Hah! Your human-like way of thinking is so nauseating.”

But I can't think anything else. Xion couldn't betray the Organisation—betray us. Roxas looked down, and clenched his fists. “What do you mean, human-like...” *Why should humans and Nobodies be that different.* Roxas looked up and glared at Saïx. “You have to trust your partners,” said Roxas, flaring up.

“Just stop, Roxas.” Axel restrained his arm. “Just, calm down a little.”

Roxas bit his lip. *I don't know what's what.*

Saïx looked down at the confused Roxas. “It seems that the fake Organisation member has appeared in Twilight Town again today. Finish your job from yesterday, Roxas.”

“Finish...,” Roxas faltered.

“If you hadn’t let him get away, it wouldn’t have come to this,” said Saïx, detachedly. “I order you to put him down.”

Roxas looked down, unable to answer.

“Axel. You are to incapacitate and bring back Xion. If it seems compelling it to RTC will be difficult, then I don’t care if you destroy it.”

“That’s...!” The breath died in Roxas’ throat. “That’s too—destroy her?!” Roxas looked like he was going to start punching any moment now.

“Calm down, Roxas,” said Axel, restraining him again.

“That’s all. Prepare quickly, and head off on your missions,” said stated to the two of them, then went away.

Left behind, Roxas bit his lip and looked down.

After a delicate silence, Axel scratched his head. “Ahhh... what a pain,” he said, sighing.

Roxas looked up. “You’re really going to listen to an order like that!?” he yelled, letting out the feelings he wasn’t able to snap at Saïx.

Upon having those words thrown at him, Axel scratched his head again in a resigned manner. “I’ll do something clever once I’ve found Xion, so don’t worry.”

“Something clever...”

“Trust me,” said Axel, patting Roxas’ shoulder.

Trust—I want to. I know. But. Roxas looked down again. *I want to trust in Axel. I do trust him, but.*

“More importantly, that imposter is pretty strong. Take care.”

Roxas nodded, still looking down. “...Got it.”

“First of all, we’ll split up in Twilight Town.”

“...Why?” Roxas asked, looking up. *Why do we have to go to the bother of working apart...*

“Because we can search more efficiently, of course. Okay, let’s hurry up and get going.”

Urged forwards, Roxas started walking. *I'm not really—happy. But, I don't know what I should do. I wonder what I have to do to make this gloominess go away...*

xxx

I wonder if Roxas noticed my lie. Axel walked down the sloping road that lead from the station plaza to the tram plaza, thinking vaguely. It would be great if he didn't notice, but—but, that's being optimistic.

Roxas is starting to get dissatisfied with the Organisation over Xion. I didn't want to think about it, but I'm part of the cause of that, and at the same time, it's linked to my worry that maybe he doubts me.

But, Axel still didn't really know what would be the best course of action to take for Roxas' sake, and for Xion's sake.

I can't even predict what kind of things will happen from now on due to contact made between Roxas and Xion. All I know is that Xion is copying Roxas' memories and abilities.

And, I still don't know what will happen... as the copying progresses.

Axel kept walking.

I want to make contact with Xion before Roxas, if I can. That's why I said we'd split up. If I can make contact first, I think perhaps I can cut down any extra friction.

I wonder how I can come to a conclusion where no one gets hurt, and everyone gets what they want. Maybe something like that doesn't exist. But, even so, I still want to struggle for it.

Axel kept walking.

xxx

Not knowing what to do, Xion stood on the roof, looking down at the tram plaza. *Usually, we'd buy ice cream at that shop there, and the three of us would eat it. I wonder if the three of us can eat ice cream together again.*

Riku said that if I waited at Twilight Town, then Roxas or Axel would surely come. But, I'm still wavering. Should I meet Roxas and Axel—should I return to

the Organisation?

Someday I'll have to leave. But now...

Just then, Xion saw a familiar shadow in the tram plaza, and stood up.
“Roxas...”

Roxas stopped walking, looking around restlessly like he was looking for something. *Something—probably me, or Riku.*

I don't really know if I should show up in front of Roxas. I don't know what I should do. What do I do...

Just then, Roxas looked up. *He's staring right at me.*

“Xion...!!”

At the sound of Roxas' voice, Xion fled instinctively.

I don't know what kind of face I should meet him with. He's chasing me. I don't know what I should say to him. Riku said so. That there wasn't much time left. I wonder how much there is, then. And, he didn't tell me what I should do.

All he did was give me the slight outline of a path.

She ran. She panted. And, then, she hesitated. Far into the plaza, where the parking space was—a dead end.

“Xion!”

I can't run away any more. She stopped. She pulled back her hood. She looked at Roxas.

Roxas was smiling in a strange, troubled way. He got closer. She looked away unconsciously.

“Axel and I were looking for you this whole time,” Roxas said.

Her eyes stayed averted. “I see... Sorry,” Xion apologised, unable to find any other words, and at the same time wondering what she was apologising for. *Maybe for selfishly leaving the Organisation, or for... There are too many things I have to apologise for, I don't really know.*

Roxas moved closer, and held out his hand. “Let's go back together. If you come back voluntarily, then I'm sure Saïx won't say annoying things to you.

Saïx—no, Saïx isn't the problem. The problem is me, myself. Roxas doesn't know that. My chest hurts.

Xion looked down, pressing at her chest.

“No matter what that guy says, I'll protect you.”

She looked up at those words. Roxas' smile made her chest hurt even worse. *I, I'm...*

“Me and Axel will protect you, Xion—”

Xion shook her head, cutting him off. *That's definitely no good. I'm sure it won't work.* “I can't go back,” Xion told him.

“Why? Why not?” Roxas asked. But, she still wasn't able to reply.

Because, I don't have an answer yet. Xion turned her back on Roxas. *I want to run. I want to escape from here. From the Organisation—from Roxas, from myself.*

“Wait!”

Roxas grabbed her hand. She stopped.

I don't know. What it would be good to do, what I should do, I have absolutely no idea. If I can't escape—hey, maybe that, then?

Xion slowly turned to Roxas, and made a Keyblade appear in her hand.

“Huh....?”

This Keyblade was like a present from you, Roxas. But, I'm sorry, Roxas. I definitely still can't—

Xion pointed her Keyblade at Roxas, and at that moment, something bounced her Keyblade back.

A spinning blade—A chakram.... Axel...!

Xion looked in the direction the blade had come from.

“Fiiiiinally found you, Xion.”

Axel was standing there, all smiles. Roxas turned to Axel, too.

Ahh, so that's how it is. Maybe. No, I think so.

Xion ran at Axel. She swung the Keyblade down. *I don't intend to lose, but I'm not sure. Axel knows that for sure. I mustn't go back to the Organisation after all, that's what I think. What does Axel think?*

"Stop..."

I heard Roxas. But, I'm sorry, Roxas. Axel definitely knows about me, and on top of that, he's telling me to return to the Organisation. And, I—even though Riku gave me this chance, I can't go back with things like this.

Axel and Xion took a suitable distance from each other. Xion let out a battle cry, and ran at Axel.

"Stop!!" Roxas yelled.

I wonder why I stopped. It's like the air stopped—no, like my breath stopped.

Then a presence behind her, and impact—and Xion fainted.

xxx

I was one step too late. I didn't find Xion first, Roxas did.

Axel had folded his arms, and listened to their conversation.

I'd thought if Roxas could persuade Xion, I wouldn't mind that either. But, the path Xion chose was refusal.

And the path I chose—was to secure Xion. At the time, it was the only thing I could do, and I made that judgement in an instant. I intended to choose the path that would cause Roxas the least harm.

Even now, I don't know whether I made the right choice. But, even so, at that moment I meant to make the best choice.

Xion had flinched for a second at Roxas' voice. Axel had gotten behind her in that unguarded moment, and hit her in the neck. He'd grabbed her as she fainted, and turned his back on Roxas who came running over, opening a dark corridor. And then, he'd RTC'd alone.

I still don't have the words I'm going to use to explain things to Roxas. I don't know how I should explain things, but my own thoughts are complicated. I have hesitations. That's why I turned my back on Roxas. Maybe Roxas—holds feelings

of distrust towards me. But, even so, I couldn't have done any differently.

Xion is hesitant. That's why she refused Roxas. And, Axel had no idea if something was happening to Roxas and Xion. The time when I'll have to make a 'final decision' will come, and for the sake of that, for now it's necessary for me to obey the orders of the Organisation—and what Saïx says.

I wonder what Xion will do now—what will become of her.

And Roxas?

Axel looked at Xion's face as she slept in a pod, and thought of the future.

xxx

Roxas hung his head. The setting sun shone on his back, stretching his shadow long.

Why... what for? I don't understand anything. I don't really understand why I was left all alone here in Twilight Town. And, I don't really understand what on earth just happened, either.

Xion raised her Keyblade against me, and Axel threw a chakram to deflect it. I couldn't do a thing.

Why did Xion turn her Keyblade on me? Why the hell did she say she couldn't come back? And, why did Axel attack her?

He didn't have to attack her. I'm sure there was more room for talking, so why?

Roxas turned to the setting sun, and narrowed his eyes against the dazzle.

I want to hurry and see Xion. Roxas opened a dark corridor, and stepped inside. Once I reach the castle, before anything else, I'm going to Xion's room. She should definitely be sleeping there.

xxx

Axel was waiting for Roxas to return, but pretending it would be chance. He stood against the wall in the corridor, staring vacantly into space.

For Xion to have been placed in a pod instead of in a bed, it means she's not being treated like a 'Nobody that was once a human' any more. Xion's situation

—and true nature. I still can't let Roxas know.

“Axel!”

Axel turned his face towards the call. Roxas' expression was harsh. Of course, Axel thought, smiling despite that. “Hey, Roxas,” he replied.

“Where's Xion?!” Roxas asked, so forcefully that it used up all his breath.

“Safe,” he answered.

“Why would you do something like that!” Roxas shouted, grabbing the collar of Axel's coat.

“Like what?” Axel returned, quietly.

Axel's calm tone seemed to dampen Roxas' outburst, and he looked down. “Why would you attack her all of a sudden...,” he asked, in a small voice.

It made Axel sigh exaggeratedly, and he shrugged. “I did what I had to,” he answered.

Roxas, still clinging to his collar, shook his head like an unwilling child. “...I'm sure you didn't, you know?” Roxas' own voice sounded uncertain, too. “Cause, we're best friends, right?” he continued, in an even smaller voice.

“That's not what this is about,” Axel said slowly, freeing his collar from Roxas' hands.

Roxas looked up. The gaze that shot from his blue eyes—was sharp. *He's never looked at me like that. My chest aches just a little.*

Axel sighed heavily once more. “If that's all, I'm off,” he said.

Roxas hung his head again. His expression threw Axel into sudden uncertainty.

I did it with the best of intentions, that's all. For Roxas' sake, for Xion's sake, for the Organisation's sake, for Isa's sake—and more than anything, for my own sake.

Axel turned his back on Roxas and walked away.

xxx

I did what I had to. That's what Axel said. Really?

Roxas kept his head down, biting his lip.

Maybe Axel's right. But, he shouldn't have had to attack her like that. Above all else, I want to hear what Xion has to say. I want to see her.

Roxas looked up, and ran for Xion's room.

xxx

Separating himself from Roxas, Axel started walking down the corridor, feet stopping at the sight of a person.

He was probably waiting for me. Standing there against the wall with his arms folded was once my best friend—Saïx's didn't take his eyes off the ground to look at Axel.

"...You're sure this is for the best?"

Saïx finally turned his face to Axel at those words. "For you to say such a thing out loud...," he said.

Such a thing—he must mean the uncertainty I'm holding inside my chest.

Saïx moved off the wall, and came closer. "Which is more important to you, that doll, or Roxas?"

Axel looked away. *Which is more important—he's asking like we have hearts.*

"Let's change the question. Which is of more weight, the useless friendship you play at, or Roxas' annihilation?"

Which is of more weight? That's obvious. I know. Of course I know which I'd prefer, out of Roxas and the doll.

"Everything is back to normal. Of course this is for the best, isn't it?"

The reason I'm unable to answer Saïx is probably because I depend on him, thought Axel.

"Xemnas has also been irritated at the recent changes in plan. Everything has to go back to normal, for the sake of our goal too... Lea."

Axel finally looked over at the sound of that nostalgic name. Saïx was looking at him. It made him think of his time as a human, and the memories came surging back.

To a Nobody, our memories are the same as our 'heart'. I remember. I won't forget. But, the days I've spent with Roxas and Xion are also part of my memories now.

Axel looked away from Saïx again, and lowered his head.

xxx

Xion's not here.

Roxas flew out of Xion's room, and started running. *Xion's not here. But Axel brought her back. Why.* His uneasiness multiplied.

He found Xaldin in a hallway.

"Hey, have you seen Xion?"

"Xion? Huh, no idea." Xaldin seemed to have no interest at all.

"Oh okay," Roxas replied, and tore off again, heading for the lobby.

Why am I so uneasy, I wonder. I want to talk to Xion. About Axel, about how things will be from now on, about how things have been up until now.

In the lobby, Luxord was sitting on the sofa, lining his cards up on the table.

"Do you know where Xion is?" Roxas called from behind Luxord.

Luxord stopped shuffling the cards in his hand, and turned to Roxas. "Xion? Back, are they..."

"You haven't seen her?"

"I only just found out they are back, so why would you think I knew where they were?" Luxord answered, and went back to shuffling his cards.

Roxas let out a small sigh, and looked down. *No one knows about Xion. Axel would know—but I don't want to talk to him. Saïx might know, too. But I really don't think Saïx would just obediently tell me about Xion. The last one left is—just maybe.*

The face of someone Roxas hadn't talked to once since joining the Organisation floated up before him. Roxas turned and stared out the window. The huge heart-shaped moon floated there.

Xemnas—Xemnas might know about Xion.

Roxas bit his lip and clenched his fist, and left the lobby.

So I know I want to ask Xemnas, but I don't really know how to see him. The place to meet Xemnas is—the usual Round Room.

Roxas headed for the Round Room. *Now that I think about it, I don't think I've ever walked like this to the Round Room—no, I remember. When I first came to the Organisation, when Axel took me, I entered the room like this. We just don't enter the room like this when we're summoned.*

Opening the large door, he saw the thirteen chairs side-by-side. And, just as if he had been waiting for Roxas, Xemnas was there.

Xemnas was resting on his elbow, looking down at Roxas.

“There's something I want to ask,” said Roxas, hastily.

“What is it?” Xemnas replied, serene.

“I would like you to tell me what happened to Xion,” he questioned.

Xemnas' lips twisted into the shape of a smile. “Xion is an important member of the Organisation. Right now, they are taking some rest. Don't worry.”

Xion is an important member of the Organisation—hearing that made Roxas feel just a little relieved. So did the words ‘taking some rest’. But, Roxas got the feeling that Xemnas wouldn't permit him to ask any more.

Just then, the world suddenly warped. *I know this warping. It's the same warping I experienced recently at Castle Oblivion. I'm dizzy.* Roxas dropped his head and bore it, willing his body not to fall apart.

—Sora.

I heard a voice. No, this is a memory. I get the feeling that Xemnas called me that, when we were on that beach once.

“...Sora,” Roxas murmured. Xemnas smiled. Roxas looked up at Xemnas.

“Who is Sora?” Roxas asked no one in particular, and Xemnas looked at him.

After a silence, Xemnas muttered, “The connection...”

“Connection?” Roxas returned, not understanding the meaning of Xemnas’ words.

“You and Xion live connected by ‘Sora’. That’s why Xion was added as a member.”

Xion and I are connected by Sora... what does that mean?

“If you want Xion to remain in the Organisation, don’t go astray with unnecessary questions. We’ll have Xion return to missions tomorrow.”

Roxas couldn’t think Xemnas was lying. *Connection—what is a connection, I wonder. But Xemnas is saying that if I want Xion to stay, I can’t have unnecessary questions. That’s fine, I suppose.*

He hesitated. Then Roxas nodded, feeling that more than his questions, more than anything, the most important thing was for Xion to be in the Organisation. “...Understood.”

Seeming satisfied with Roxas’ response, Xemnas disappeared from his chair.

Roxas, left alone in the middle of the Round Room, murmured Xemnas’ word one more time.

“...Connection, huh...”

xxx

Continue to [Chapter 4: Absorption](#)

Chapter 4: Absorption

Written by: Kanemaki Tomoco

Original Plan: Nomura Tetsuya and Nojima Kazushige

Illustration: Amano Shiro

Translations: Goldpanner

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xxx

That's definitely unusual.

So nervous her breath was constricted, Naminé looked up at Sora's pod.

It can't be—oh no, is it all over?

DiZ entered the room on hurried feet. "What happened?" he asked in a strong tone.

"Sora's memory restoration—has stopped." Naminé looked down at a monitor on a machine next to the pod. Checking the data revealed that to be the same.

"What do you mean," DiZ pressed.

Naminé blew out a small breath, and looked back up at the pod. "If things go on like this... Sora won't be able to wake up."

At Naminé's words, DiZ looked up at the pod, too. "Then all that's left is to take the tough route."

"But...!" Naminé responded, automatically. She looked down. *Really, I knew the day would come when we'd have to, as DiZ said, take Sora's memories back even by force. I knew, but even so, when I think about Roxas and her, I don't think I can do it.*

"Nobodies aren't allowed to exist. You too know this, Naminé."

The words stabbed into her chest. "Yes..." *That's right, Nobodies are not allowed to exist. Neither am I. But, but even so, it definitely... hurts.*

Head still down, Naminé stared.

As if looking down at her, Sora slept in the pod.

xxx

Sitting on his chair in the Round Room, Xemnas looked down at Saïx.

“Was how we dealt with Roxas and Xion... really for the best?”

Saïx’s tone of voice was completely different to usual, as if he were talking to an old friend.

“Xion has now strayed from our original plan. However, it seems that this has produced interesting results.”

“Results?” Saïx questioned, not satisfied with Xemnas’ answer.

“The key—”

Key. Everything is connected by the key, isn’t it. The key to the worlds, the Keyblade. Is the Keyblade itself the ‘key’ to solving all the mysteries?

“Just as we predicted, Xion received influence from Roxas. It was desirable for us, but things went even further, and through Roxas she received influence from Sora, and went and gained too much of a self.”

Sora’s influence was stronger than we had predicted. It’s probably because the Keyblade Hero’s power really is that mighty.

“I thought the plan had failed, but—instead, Xion existing now shuts away a part of Sora’s memories.

In other words, these happenings that our Organisation didn’t predict were probably also unpredicted by Sora, who is probably sleeping on some world somewhere, and those who protect and help him.

“If we keep Xion by Roxas’ side like this, Sora will not awaken.”

“I see—but what about the black-coated man?” *What I’m interested in is the black-coated man—in other words, Riku.*

“Don’t let him have any contact with Roxas from now on. He’s no more than foreign matter that will make Xion less perfect,” ordered Xemnas, and Saïx lowered his head respectfully. “So then, everything will go according to the original plan—”

In a place Xemnas couldn't see, Saix's mouth twisted into a smile. *Everything will go according to the original plan. Nothing is shaky.*

That's right, isn't it? Lea.

XXX

I woke up on a bed. But I remember sleeping somewhere else until just now, in a huge machine—in a pod. Xion closed her eyes again. I remember so many things. Maybe, it's that I haven't forgotten. I didn't dream. I feel completely refreshed. I even feel like my body is lighter. I don't know what happened to me inside that pod. Maybe the pod had the power to heal damage to a doll.

Xion sat up in bed, and took out a shell that was under her pillow. She looked at it.

Promise—time.

If Axel hadn't done what he did, then I wouldn't have been able to return like this. And, if Riku hadn't urged me to return, I'm sure I wouldn't have been able to return either.

And Roxas—Of course I think that maybe, for Roxas' sake, I shouldn't have returned. But, even so, I want to find my own path.

There's surely still time. I'm not too late. Because we're friends.

Xion squeezed the shell.

XXX

My cheeks are cold.

"W-what is this..."

He scrubbed at his cheeks. They were wet for some reason. Everything looked blurry.

He was in his bed. In his same-old room—Kingdom Hearts floated outside the window.

I had a dream. The dream felt very painful. A dream in which two people who were important to me disappeared right in front of my eyes. Because I was weak. Because I couldn't use the Keyblade.

Maybe, when she wasn't able to use her Keyblade, Xion felt like this.

Roxas sat up in bed, and stared vaguely into space. *I feel kind of—sluggish. Tired. I don't feel like I even slept. I want to go back to sleep. It's probably because I dreamt. But, I always dream. I don't usually remember them this clearly, but the fact that I dreamed isn't any different to normal.*

Roxas looked at his own face in the mirror. It was the same face as always. *My eyes look a bit red, but it's probably because I'm sleepy.*

Roxas got ready, and headed for the lobby.

xxx

Xion was in the lobby. So was Axel. Remembering Xemnas' words yesterday, Roxas felt a little relieved.

Xion is properly in the Organisation—they didn't dispose of her. I'm so glad.

"Sorry for worrying you, Roxas," called Xion. Axel stood behind her, arms folded

"Nah, as long as you're okay, it doesn't matter."

"...I worried Axel too, didn't I," said Xion, turning to Axel.

"Don't worry about it," Axel answered.

Roxas suddenly didn't know what to say to the two of them. *I don't know why Axel attacked Xion like that. Axel was serious. He would have defeated her for real.*

Thinking about it made Roxas uneasy. And, in the same way, Axel hadn't spoken to Roxas.

Perhaps sensing the awkward atmosphere, Xion tilted her head. "Are you okay, Roxas? Your face looks a bit sickly-coloured..."

"No it's not, I'm fine."

"...Really...?"

Xion turned back to Axel, sounding anxious. But, Axel didn't say anything. And then, Roxas walked over to Saix in silence.

“Today, you will be taking a mission with Xion,” Saïx ordered. It made Roxas a little bit more relieved. At the same time, he was also glad that his mission wasn’t with Axel.

“Got it. Xion—let’s go.”

“...Yeah.”

Roxas started walking alone, stepping into a dark corridor.

“Wait, Roxas,” said Xion, chasing after him. She turned to Axel just before he entered the corridor.

“Don’t push yourself,” said Axel. A smile spread across Xion’s face, and her figure disappeared into the dark corridor.

xxx

The mission was to exterminate a giant Heartless in Agrabah.

The air in Agrabah is like always—too dry, making breathing feel difficult.

No... did it really feel like this when I came here before...?

Roxas stared at the palm of his hand, and willed the Keyblade to appear in it.

It’s okay—just like always.

“Roxas?” Xion called, coming up behind him. “What’s wrong?”

“Nothing,” Roxas answered, and the Keyblade vanished. *Maybe it’s because I didn’t know what to say to Axel. And maybe there’s some other reason. I can’t calm down for some reason. The sluggishness I felt when I woke up this morning is still lingering.*

“The colour of your face is off...”

“It’s your imagination,” Roxas answered. *Usually I would be much happier to be on a mission with Xion, but I can’t work up that feeling.* “Let’s go.”

“O-Okay...”

Roxas broke into a run, kicking up dust and dirt.

xxx

Roxas seems a little off somehow. Getting anxious, Xion followed after Roxas.

They went from the city of Agrabah to the depths of the caverns, defeating Heartless. *I don't know exactly what's off, though.* Roxas was defeating Heartless with bare rage, and she was unable to call out to him. *Something's weird, Roxas.*

"Looks like a dead end..."

Roxas stopped. Xion suddenly remembered something.

Do I know this place...? No, I don't know it, but my memories do. "I remember..."

"Huh?"

Xion moved closer to a blank wall. *Yes, it's definitely this wall.*

"The keyhole is... here."

Xion held the Keyblade high, and a keyhole appeared there.

"...See?"

Xion turned to Roxas—and at that moment, a memory surfaced. She stopped breathing. She felt dizzy.

The boy facing the wall with his Keyblade is—that's... who are you? Are you Sora?

"Xion!" Roxas was holding Xion up, who had crumpled. "Are you okay?"

"Y-yeah..."

As Roxas held her securely, Xion looked into his face. *Roxas' face looks so similar to the boy in my memories.*

"So similar...", Xion murmured.

"Huh?" Roxas asked.

Just then—the ground rumbled.

"It's here!"

The two of them readied their Keyblades at almost the exact same time. The huge round Heartless—a Spike Crawler—came falling down from above their heads.

“Let’s go, Xion.”

“Yeah!” At the sound of Roxas’ voice, Xion broke into a run. *My body feels so light. Like I could fight and fight forever.*

Xion swung the Keyblade down, aiming for the Spike Crawler. The Keyblade hit the top of its’ hard body, and she really felt the impact.

The Spike Crawler, spinning round and round, struck out at Roxas.

“Roxas!”

“Ugh—”

Roxas hit the wall. *So... Roxas really is off?*

Xion kicked her feet into the ground, gripped the Keyblade, stood in the Spike Crawler’s path, and stopped it moving. Then, she swung the Keyblade down on its head once more.

I feel like I’m overflowing with strength.

The Spike Crawler crashed and fell, turning into light and disappearing. Without even waiting to make sure that the heart flew up, Xion ran over to Roxas, who was still collapsed.

“Roxas!”

Roxas slowly tried to stand up.

“Are you okay?”

She peered into Roxas’ face, worried. *Just as I thought—he’s definitely off.*

“I’m probably just a bit tired.” Roxas smiled faintly.

That should definitely not be the case—but. “Are you really okay?” she asked one more time, and Roxas smiled and nodded.

“Of course I’m fine. Okay, let’s go back.”

His face was still a sickly colour. *I’m uneasy. Maybe this is because—maybe.*

Roxas started walking quickly, and Xion followed after, clasping her hands to her chest as if trying to smother the anxieties.

Having finished the mission, he ate ice cream on the clock tower with Xion. *I wanted to eat ice cream like this with Xion again for so, so long.*

Roxas ate his ice cream, staring in front of him. *Today was kind of weird. It felt like my strength was being sapped, and I had trouble breathing the whole time. But I'm just tired, definitely.*

"Are you really okay?" Xion asked, sounding anxious, and Roxas smiled.

She's finally come back, I don't want to worry her. "It feels pretty weird," Roxas said laughingly, and he took another bite of his ice cream.

"Huh?"

Roxas shrugged. "Having you worry about me," he said jokingly. Xion laughed a little too, dragged in.

"Hey, what do you mean by that?" she said, putting a hand on her hip exaggeratedly and talking in a cranky tone. It was funny, and Roxas laughed out loud again before answering.

"I'm always the one worrying about you, but today it's backwards and I'm having you worried over me—it's a strange feeling." *Because it's always me and Axel worrying together over Xion.*

"I do at least worry about you," Xion said.

I wonder if I really was in such a state as to make her worry about me—I can't really tell, myself. I just had this sensation like my body wouldn't do what I wanted it to.

Not wanting that conversation to go on any longer, Roxas changed the subject.

"...It's so great that you've come back, even though it happened like that."

"...I guess Axel isn't coming," was the reply Xion dropped—

Roxas hadn't expected Xion to bring Axel up, and his chest fluttered again.

"—Well... I dunno."

Xion peered into his face, looking a little anxious. "Did you guys fight?"

Roxas looked down, clenching his fists. "That guy... how could he attack you

out of the blue like that....” *I knew it, I couldn’t forgive him. I can’t comprehend what he did.*

Xion sighed heavily. “But, if Axel didn’t do what he did, I wouldn’t have been able to come back,” she said calmly. She didn’t seem to mind what Axel had done at all.

My words won’t come out. I don’t know what to say.

“Aren’t the two of you best friends?”

“...You’re my best friend too, Xion.”

Xion sighed again, looking troubled. “...I want to eat ice cream, the three of us,” she muttered.

She wants to eat ice cream, the three of us—so do I. But, I don’t know what to say to Axel, or how I’m supposed to make my face look when I see him.

“The sunset is pretty again today,” said Xion.

Roxas looked up too, and gazed at the sky.

The day when the three of us will be able to eat ice cream together again—will that day really come...?

xxx

I definitely want to talk to someone about what’s happening to Roxas—I want to consult someone about it. To someone... no, I want to see Axel, and talk to him. I think I have to.

Returning to the castle, Xion went in search of Axel.

Maybe he went back to his room...

Walking along the corridor that lead to Axel’s room, she caught sight of a red-haired figure from behind, and called out. “Axel!”

Axel stopped walking, and he’s turning to me.

Xion ran up to him.

“Do you need something?” Axel said, somewhat coldly, and the words died in Xion’s throat. *What do I do...*

“Uh... Um...”

“If you don’t need anything I’m going,” said Axel, and he went to walk away, but Xion grabbed his coat. *I have to show some courage.*

“R-Roxas has been off lately. Do you know anything about it?” Axel turned to her again, and Xion found strength in it. She kept talking. “He says he gets tired from using the Keyblade. And today, I fought like him... And, um...” *What do I do, I can’t find the words.*

Axel sighed heavily. “You know him better than me, don’t you?”

Xion stared up at Axel. “What do you... mean?” *His tone is still cold. But I have to ask.*

“What do you think, Xion.”

“...I don’t understand.”

“You don’t understand... right. Is that because you’re a doll?” he shot.

Xion’s breath was knocked out.

“You were originally a Replica built to copy Roxas’ power. If Roxas’ power is getting weak, and yours is getting strong, then maybe you’re absorbing more of Roxas’ power than necessary.”

The truth stripped bare made Xion hang her head.

Yeah—yeah, that’s right. I am a doll, created by the Organisation. A doll created to copy Roxas’ abilities. But, but, you know—that’s really not all I am.

Surely Axel doesn’t know everything. Maybe there are things even I don’t know. What’s hidden in my own body? “I... What should I do?” she murmured. *I can’t find an answer.*

“Think about it yourself. You’re not just a doll, you know.” Axel put his hands on both her arms, and she looked up. His expression was serious—and kind. “You’re our best friend, okay—got it memorised?”

Xion nodded. “Yeah...” *Axel’s reply is probably the exact same as Riku’s. That, it’s something I have to find on my own. Riku—that’s right, Riku... and, that boy.* “Axel, there’s something else on my mind.”

Axel let go of her arms. “What?”

“Today, I saw a boy who looked a lot like Roxas.” Axel’s expression flickered in surprise for a moment. “Hey, is... is my power really just to copy Roxas’ power...?”

“...I don’t know either.”

Xion looked down again. “I see...” *If it wasn’t just power.* Her chest hurt from anxiety. *If the boy I saw today was Sora—then...*

“Memories and power...,” Axel announced unexpectedly, and Xion looked up.

xxx

Continue to [Chapter 5: Xion-Seven Days](#)

Chapter 5: Xion-Seven Days

Written by: Kanemaki Tomoco

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Illustration: Amano Shiro

Translations: Goldpanner

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Of the thirteen chairs, three were filled by people. Xemnas, Xigbar and Saïx were there.

“Turns out Sora’s a highly influential guy, as they say,” said Xigbar, stroking his chin.

“We didn’t count on it gaining a will or going so far as to be able to change shape, but it means that when it comes to ability as a vessel, the doll is better,” said Xemnas, closing his eyes.

Saïx watched the two of them. *Able to change shape—that’s right, Xion is able to change shape. She can change shape to reflect the memories of the person looking at her.* However, Saïx had never seen Xion as anything but Xion. *They can’t be just any old memories.*

Xion is affected by Sora—to put it another way, affected by the Keyblade Hero. And so, to those who have been deeply involved with Sora, Xion’s shape is overlaid, based on those memories, with that of the Keyblade Hero they once saw. The Keyblade Hero is not in my memories, so to me, Xion is Xion—it stays a doll.

Saïx wondered what Xigbar and Xemnas each saw when they looked at Xion. *I’ve researched into both of their pasts as humans to a certain degree, but even so there are many mysteries.*

“The time is ripe—Saïx, are the preparations ready?” Xemnas asked languidly, and Saïx nodded.

“In a few days, all three of the machines will be operational.”

“Nicely done.”

Saïx was the one to ask something this time. “What is to be done about Roxas?”

“Both Roxas and Xion are by nature influenced by Sora. Everything will be fine if we have control over either one. Whether things continue as is and Xion absorbs Roxas, or whether Roxas defeats Xion and gets the power back, our plans don’t change. Either way, Sora’s power is ours.”

“Understood, sir,” Saïx replied, and Xemnas disappeared.

“...Well, do your best. The best a kid without a heart can do, anyway,” said Xigbar, and he too disappeared.

Left alone in the Round Room, Saïx looked up at the dome-like round ceiling.

We simply need Sora’s power. There’s nothing in this to undermine the plan. And, if there’s nothing to undermine Xemnas’ plan, it means that there’s nothing to ruin our plan either.

However, Saïx was a little uneasy. *It’s Axel. I can read his hesitation. Perhaps it was a mistake, letting Axel have this excessive contact with Roxas.*

Saïx sighed once, exactly like a human, and disappeared.

xxx

I didn’t dream last night, either. I’m sure I slept properly, but my body feels heavy.

His head was fuzzy. The palms of his hands were hot, and his feet seemed numb. It was hazy around the area of his chest. He went to take a deep breath—and couldn’t. *That kind of hurt.*

Sitting on his bed, Roxas stared into the space in front of him.

I know something weird is happening to my body. But, even so, I don’t know what to do.

Roxas went to stand up, and had to sit down again, dizzy. *What the hell.*

And Xion came back and everything, but—but actually, something’s felt off

ever since Xion came back.

I'm just a bit tired. It'll get better in a few days, for sure.

Roxas' hands lay on his knees. He opened them, then closed them again. Then he clenched them.

I'm okay. I'm definitely okay.

xxx

I couldn't sleep with all this on my mind. Axel frowned, feeling a dull pain behind his temples. Headaches from lack of sleep were unpleasant.

Rather than get complained at for oversleeping, Axel had come to the lobby before anyone else was up, and continued his train of thought on the sofa.

Xion and Roxas—memories and power, Sora... the Keyblade Hero. Beings known as Replicas.

I had met with a Replica built from Riku's memories once, in Castle Oblivion. I don't know if 'had met with' is the right way to phrase it. But, the truth of the matter is that we met for the first time there.

The doll, made by Vexen, obtained abilities by copying Riku's memories. That time, the memory witch Naminé was used for the memory copying. But, Vexen did say that Naminé existing in itself was an irregularity. That means that there would have been a way to copy memories to a Replica even without Naminé. If not, then the Replicas would have truly been nothing but dolls.

That made Axel remember the actions of the Organisation members who had pulled out Sora and Riku's memories in Castle Oblivion. *Through battle, Larxene took from Sora and Vexen took from Riku memories that they trapped in cards, and entrusted them to Naminé. Naminé subtly rewrote the memories she was entrusted with, and they were put back in Sora and the Replica.*

This probably means that Naminé's power was necessary for rewriting memories. But if it were only copying, then all you probably really need to do to copy memories and abilities is battle...?

That's why they're making Xion move with Roxas, to copy the memories. Memories and abilities are tied together. So Xion is getting Sora's memories,

and acquiring his abilities at the same time.

Last night, I told Xion herself that perhaps she was absorbing more of Roxas' power than necessary. But, the truth is quite different.

I remember. There was another way that the Riku Replica was able to get abilities—by destroying an opponent with his own hands, a Replica absorbs their abilities completely.

I knew that. That's why I used the Riku Replica to destroy Zexion. Because I thought it was necessary.

Xion's already copying Roxas' memories—no, Sora's memories, that are inside Roxas. But still not completely. So then, I wonder what the Organisation will make Xion do next.

“Good morning, Axel.”

“...Xion.”

Axel looked up to find Xion standing there with a gloomy expression.

“Slept well?” Axel asked laughingly, and Xion shrugged and shook her head. “Don't go thinking there's no time left. You should still have time to think. Got it memorised?”

Xion looked down. “...I guess so...”

Axel didn't really know whether there really was any time left.

“Xion, mission.”

Xion turned at the sound of the voice, startled.

“Saïx...”

Saïx was looking down at her.

“A very strong Heartless has appeared at Halloween Town. Head there and put it down.”

“Got it.”

Just as Xion nodded, Roxas appeared in the lobby.

“Morning, Xion.”

“Morning.”

Xion turned her back on Roxas. And, Roxas wouldn't look at Axel. Axel gave a small, wry smile at their childish behaviour.

“Hey, um...,” Roxas began.

“I'm sorry, I have to go,” Xion interrupted whatever he was about to say, and stepped into a dark corridor. Plainly depressed, Roxas hung his head.

Even with being depressed, Roxas' face is a nasty colour, Axel thought. I just told Xion a minute ago that there was still time. But maybe there really isn't much left after all.

Also seeing Roxas' condition, Saïx's gaze flickered to Axel for a moment before calling out to Roxas. “How are you feeling, Roxas?”

“...Same as always.”

At Roxas' answer, Saïx flashed a smile. It was a horrible smile, Axel thought for a second, and then he felt his own chest clench.

“I have a special mission for you and your Keyblade. A very strong Heartless has appeared in Halloween Town.”

Halloween Town... that's the same mission he gave Xion. I smell a rat.

“You'll go put it down for me, won't you?”

“Leave it to me!”

“Hey, hey,” Axel found himself saying, “will you be okay, Roxas?”

A displeased expression appeared on Roxas' face. “...What are you saying,” Roxas muttered in a small voice, and turned his back on Axel.

“Lately, you—”

“Hurry up and go on your own mission, Axel,” Saïx interrupted, urgently.

Mission—but he hasn't even told me today's mission yet, thought Axel, looking up at Saïx. Saïx was staring at him. Ah—of course, so that's it. Axel thought a little sadly of the Saïx who couldn't tell a lie to save himself.

“I'll be off then. Later, Axel.” Roxas started walking, disappearing into a dark

corridor just as Xion had. Axel watched him go.

“...You planning to get in the way again?” said Saïx.

Axel kept his eyes averted. “In the way of what. Of who,” he asked.

“In the way of us. I trust you.”

Axel cracked a dry smile. “You say that exactly like you would if you had a heart.”

“My memories of the time I did have one are making it so, that’s all. If you get in the way any further, though, the memories I have since becoming a Nobody will overwrite them.”

“...That sounds like a threat.”

“It’s quite similar. Think good and hard about it,” Saïx said in closing, and walked away.

Axel stood there, rooted to the spot.

xxx

It was night at Halloween Town, just like always, and everything was wrapped in the damp air particular to that time. Above her head floated a giant, though not heart-shaped, moon.

Xion walked through a graveyard.

There are so many things I have to think about. I can’t find the answer.

...I don’t want to think.

I like keeping myself moving, I don’t have to think, thought Xion, as she defeated Heartless.

Moving deeper into the graveyard through a hole in the wall, she came to a place enveloped in mist. It was the first time she’d encountered such mist in Halloween Town. In other places, the mist had never come as thick as this.

Xion pulled her hood up against the sticky damp air.

This is a pretty—horrible atmosphere, she felt, and at that instant, a presence appeared behind her. She turned.

Heartless!

I didn't feel its presence until it got so close, how did that...

The Heartless swung the blade in its hand down. Xion jumped back instantly, dodging the blow, then readied the Keyblade in her hand.

The mist is so thick, I can't see where it will come from next. The right this time —?

Xion blocked the Heartless' attack and took a step forwards, pushing, and repelled the blade, which then came down at her.

Strong—and fast. But, it's okay. I don't get the feeling I'll lose.

After taking a moment to get to a suitable distance, Xion ran at her opponent. *The next attack will decide this...!*

Just then.

Something came slicing through the air—a chakram. *Axel's chakram.*

"Stop it, the both of you!" Axel shouted, pushing her and the Heartless apart.

What does he mean?

The mist cleared. Standing there was Roxas.

"Xion?!"

"Roxas...?"

The opponent she'd been fighting, thinking it was a Heartless, was Roxas.

Cold sweat broke out all over her body. "...The Heartless I was fighting was you, Roxas...?"

The Organisation is thinking—The Organisation is trying to.

Her chest tightened.

"This mission was a trap. It was set up to make you two fight," said Axel.

The Keyblade dropped from Roxas' hand, and disappeared. "That's..."

If Axel hadn't stopped me... I would have... Xion hung her head.

"Why would the Organisation do such a thing...," Roxas murmured.

“We’ll talk later. Oh yeah—we can even eat ice cream together like we haven’t in ages,” said Axel, smiling just a little.

“...But—”

Axel stopped Xion from continuing with a look, and patted Roxas lightly on the back.

“Hey, let’s go.”

“O-okay.”

Axel put his hand on Xion’s shoulder, this time. “You’re coming too, Xion.”

“...Okay.”

And so, guided by Axel, the group of three stepped into a dark corridor.

xxx

The setting sun was dazzling. Roxas narrowed his eyes, then bit his ice cream.

“It’s cold...,” Xion murmured in a small voice, then smiled.

“The three of us eating ice cream together like this... It’s been a while,” said Roxas, returning Xion’s smile.

“That’s cause a lot’s happened lately, hasn’t it,” Axel said.

I’m still worried about what Axel did to Xion, of course. But, even so, being able to eat ice cream with Xion and Axel like this makes me a little happy.

Why did the Organisation make me and Xion fight. When I think about it, my mind fills with so many doubts and worries, but it was Axel that stopped it, and I don’t know what I’d do without him. When I think about that, I think I can forgive him.

Axel has his own thoughts. Xion said it, too; if Axel didn’t do what he did, she wouldn’t have been able to come back to the Organisation. I thought there were other ways to bring her back, but maybe at the time there really weren’t.

“Oh hey, did you guys know that some of these ice creams are winners?” said Axel, letting his foot swing.

“Winner?” Xion asked.

“Apparently, winner can be written on the finished ice cream stick. I’ve never seen one, though.”

“Ah...,” said Roxas accidentally, and loudly.

Axel gave him a weird look. “Hm? What’s up?”

Winner—that’s right. So much happened, and I forgot. The winner stick—I have one. That stick... I’ve been keeping it safe, thinking to show Axel. Not to Xion. When I found it, I wanted to show Axel.

“N-nothing. Anyway, does something happen if you win?”

When I show Axel the winner stick, I’m sure he’ll be so surprised. Thinking about it makes me happy somehow. The truth is, I know what happens if you win, but I’ll keep that a secret.

Axel tilted his head. “Well—probably?”

“Don’t you know?” Roxas asked, teasingly.

“Well... it is winning after all, so it has to be something good, right?”

“Something good...?” Roxas asked.

“Hee hee hee...,” Xion laughed. Roxas and Axel looked at her. “The two of you are close, aren’t you?” she said, and then she looked out at the setting sun. “Such a pretty sunset...”

Drawn by the admiration in her voice, Roxas and Axel looked at the sunset too.

A red sunset, just like always.

With the setting sun shining down on it, the whole world is red.

“It’s the same sunset we’ve always come to see, but it looks especially pretty today,” said Xion, and Roxas thought she looked a whole lot more refreshed than usual. “It would be nice if the three of us could always be together like this...,” Xion said.

It would be nice, if the three of us, could always be together, like this. I think so too. I hope so. I want it.

“—Hey, why don’t the three of us go off somewhere?” Roxas said.

“Huh?” Xion stared at Roxas. Axel didn’t say a thing.

“If we did, then surely, we could be together always.”

If we stay in the Organisation, then surely, we can’t be together always. Then, the three of us should go away somewhere.

Xion shook her head. “We can’t... do that...”

Really? I want to say that’s not true. But... “...Oh... I guess you’re right...” I know it’s impossible. I don’t know. Maybe, just maybe we could. But right now anyway, we definitely can’t. Maybe they’ll annihilate us, and, I dunno, I get the feeling other bad things would happen. Like, for example, being forced to fight Xion.

Axel, who had been silent the whole time, finally opened his mouth. “The important thing isn’t that we see each other every day, but—”

“That we think of each other, even when we’re not together, right?” Xion finished for him.

That’s right, the important thing is to think of each other.

“I’ve got it good and memorised, Axel.” Xion laughed at Axel.

“...So you do,” Axel said, taking a bite of his ice cream. He didn’t look at Xion, just kept gazing at the sunset.

“I’ll always have it memorised. I... could never forget.”

“I could never forget either,” Roxas said. *I could never forget. I could absolutely never forget. The three of us watching the sunset like this, too—absolutely not.*

I promise—that I will never forget. Even if the three of us are separated someday, I could never forget.

The setting sun shone on the three of them.

xxx

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Chapter 6: Chairs

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Translations: Goldpanner

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xxx

Xion got up out of bed, and got ready as usual. Then, she looked into a mirror that sat in a corner of the room.

The usual me. And, not the usual me. Xion stared at herself in the mirror. *That's—someone else, not me. But, maybe I know who that is, that me reflected in the mirror. A boy who looks a lot like Roxas.*

Xion looked down for a moment, then she looked back into the mirror. Her usual self was reflected back at her. Thoughts just as unstable as her own self, Xion smiled.

Riku gave me this time. It can't go on like this. I have to decide. Before the Organisation gets serious and does something.

xxx

This is the limit. Naminé looked up at Sora's sleeping pod. Sora was sleeping, as always. And, all action had stopped. "Sora...", she murmured, and bowed her head at the presence of two people behind her.

"It's come to a complete stop, hasn't it," said DiZ, looking up at Sora.

"Yes...", Naminé answered, and she too looked up at Sora once more. *Sora, who looks like a lifeless shell. Maybe having no memories means that the Sora in front of my eyes isn't really Sora, but his container.*

"We cannot hesitate a moment longer. You understand this too, don't you?"

At DiZ voice, the other one there—Riku—nodded. "Yeah."

I wonder what Riku plans to do. About the kid. And, I wonder what that kid plans to do. My chest feels tight. Nobodies aren't allowed to exist. Neither am I. But—'that's why', they say.

Indecisions developed in her thoughts.

"If so, you should act quickly."

"...I guess you're right," Riku answered, and he left the room.

"What do you plan to do, Naminé?"

"I will watch over Sora, here."

"I see. Do as you please—Witch." DiZ disappeared.

Alone in the room, she said the boy's name once more, as if it were a prayer.
"Sora..."

xxx

Opening his eyes, he felt a little more refreshed than usual.

I didn't dream. I was so surprised about what happened yesterday—that the opponent I tried to fight was Xion. I don't really understand what the Organisation is trying to do. I wonder what they wanted to have happen from making me and Xion fight. But, Axel saved me. I'm sure he'll stand by me from now on. And, it was great that the three of us were able to eat ice cream together for the first time in ages. I was able to forget those awful things.

Oh yeah—ice cream. The winner stick.

Roxas sat up, and opened the drawer of the little shelf at his bedside. Rolling around in there were a lot of shells—and deeper, one stick.

I totally forgot. I wanted to use it when with Axel some time. Today at the clock tower, I'm going to show Axel and Xion, and brag, and then we'll all eat ice cream together. Just like yesterday...

xxx

Walking the hallways, he tried to gather his scattered thoughts. He hadn't slept well today, either. Axel shook his head slowly, trying to dispel his sleepiness, but he still felt hazy remembering what had happened yesterday.

The Organisation tried to annihilate either Roxas or Xion. I'm thinking about what I should do, what I want to do. I want to know a way to save both Roxas and Xion. I want to respect both their wishes. I wondered all night whether there's really and truly no way to do that—and, of course, I couldn't find the answer.

"It seems you chose the selfish course of action."

Axel stopped walking. *I didn't notice he was there—Saïx.* He turned. "What are you talking about?" he answered, smiling thinly.

"Our plan does not require two of them. You understand this, don't you? One is plenty."

When you say 'we,' who do you mean? Axel wanted to ask suddenly, giving a bitter smile instead. *We—Is 'we' the Organisation itself? Or is 'we' just Saïx and me? I don't really know any more.*

"Think good and hard about it."

I am thinking. I'm thinking so hard that I'm sick of it. I'm thinking so hard that I just want you to tell me the answer. He wanted to tell him so, but Saïx had already started walking towards the lobby.

It's just like that back is rejecting me. And, I'm realising that my memories of the past are too different from the thoughts I'm having now. Why the hell am I here? I don't really know any more. What the hell do I want to do?

Axel entered the lobby, following Saïx.

"I'll be counting on you today, Red," came a sudden and unexpected voice, and Axel stopped walking. It was Xigbar.

"What do you mean?" Axel asked, and Xigbar shrugged.

"Tell him, poppet."

Xion, standing behind him with her hood up, nodded. Her hood was pulled far forwards. *I wonder why.*

"Xigbar and me and you have a mission together today," she said.

Axel found himself looking at Saïx, who stood in the middle of the room. Saïx

was only gazing over at them in silence.

A mission for this particular set of members—there has to be some kind of ulterior motive here.

“Not satisfied with me?” Xigbar said laughingly.

“It’s just the first time the three of us have gone out,” Axel replied, shrugging. “Why would I be dissatisfied? It’s not often that we get to take a stroll with No. 2, now. Right, Xion?”

“That’s true,” Xion replied. Her hood in the way, Axel couldn’t really tell what her expression was like.

“So, why are you wearing your hood up today, Xion?”

“...I didn’t sleep well and my eyes are swollen,” Xion replied in a small voice. The reply made something twinge in Axel’s chest, but he didn’t know why.

“What a girly reason, ha ha,” said Xigbar, his laugh sounding put on.

“...Morning,” Roxas greeted.

At the sound of Roxas’ voice, the three of them turned to the entrance to the lobby.

“You’re a bit late, aren’t you?” answered Saïx.

“I didn’t sleep well...,” said Roxas, looking away. He walked over to Xion. “Are the three of us going out today?”

Without waiting for Xion, Saïx was the one to answer him again. “You’re alone for your mission.”

“...I can’t swap with Xigbar, can I?” Roxas suggested.

“How extraordinarily childish you seem. So you can’t do anything if Axel isn’t with you?” Saïx went on to say. Roxas bowed his head, and bit his lip.

“That’s not... true.”

I want to send a lifeboat, but even if I did it probably wouldn’t do anything. It’s more important that I find out the hidden flip side to today’s mission.

“Your mission is separate. Hurry up and get ready,” Saïx said, running Roxas

down.

“...Got it,” Roxas answered.

Xigbar put his arms around Axel and Xion, friendly. “Well then, we’ll be off. See ya, kiddo.”

“I’ll talk to you later, Roxas.”

Roxas nodded to both Xigbar and Xion.

“Don’t push yourself too much,” Axel called out, last, and Roxas looked at him. He was smiling just a little. *Maybe what happened yesterday dispelled Roxas’ doubts, a little...*

Then, Axel and the other disappeared into a corridor of darkness.

xxx

Roxas’ mission was Heartless extermination in Twilight Town. *It was a same-old boring mission*, thought Roxas, wielding his Keyblade. The winner stick was in his pocket.

But—I feel so uneasy for some reason. The weird combination of Axel, Xion and Xigbar is playing on my mind. It’s the first time I’ve seen the three of them have a mission together. I have a hunch that something special might happen.

Then, he remembered the events of the previous day. *The Organisation made Xion and I fight, what did they want from that? If we fought with our true natures hidden, one of us could have been wounded. At the very worst, destroyed, maybe. Was the Organisation trying to get either of Xion or I destroyed?*

Either of us... Was it even really either one?

I’m sure the Organisation knows—Saix knows that I haven’t been feeling well, realised Roxas. If so, was it me who would have been destroyed...?

Roxas stopped. The gloominess deep inside his chest spread wider.

Is the Organisation trying to have me destroyed...?

xxx

The mission was mediocre; it didn’t seem worthy of three people. Axel

providing cover for Xigbar and Xion, they pushed further into the forest. They were in Wonderland. It was a world composed of strange gardens and richly coloured forests.

Xion had kept her hood up the entire time.

Something feels off. I don't know the true nature of it. Yesterday's happenings—Xion's abilities. Every time I think about those things, I get irritated. I stop being able to settle down. I stop knowing what I want to do, what I should do.

"That's my Poppet! Leaving me with nothing to do here," said Xigbar, grinning as he watched Xion fight. He turned to Axel. "Don't you think so, Carrot-top?"

"Yeah. I have no idea why you're here either," said Axel, with only the slightest hint of sarcasm.

Xigbar laughed like it was unbearably funny, body almost bent double. "Hahaha. So very true. It's because I tagged along on my own selfish whim, that's all. Guys shooting for power do make a point to listen to guys like me."

Guys shooting for power—he means Saïx. Axel listened to Xigbar in silence. *I'm sure Xigbar has noticed Saïx and my conspiracy. So, he's trying to trick me into revealing the truth.*

"Don't be so guarded. I'll tell you something nice." Xigbar put an arm around Axel's shoulder, and whispered, "It's about the doll. Or maybe to you I should be using the word Replica?"

Axel looked at Xigbar's face reflexively. His expression was the same as always; plastered with a grin.

"That there is a new model of doll. A better version of the one you would have seen at Castle Oblivion. It doesn't just copy. Even without defeating its opponent, it can absorb abilities along with memories. And, it can change shape in response to the memories of whoever is looking."

Sweat broke out along Axel's back. His insides were buzzing. "...What do you mean?"

"I mean this—Hey, poppet," Xigbar called to Xion.

Xion stopped her hand from destroying a Heartless. "...What?"

“Don’t you think it’d be okay to take that hood down about now?” Xigbar put his hand on Xion’s hood. The moment he did, Xion cut Xigbar down with the Keyblade.

“—Xion?!” Axel yelled, reflexively. Xigbar came thumping down in front of him, thrown back. Xion’s hood had been dislodged in the process.

And standing there was—

Xigbar stood up, laughing. “Haha!! So that’s how it is!!” Xion pulled her hood back up in a hurry. “For me to be able to see you, well, that’s something.”

What the hell does Xigbar see Xion as? And the way Xion looks to me—why do I see her like that?

“Why do you always glare at me like that?” Xigbar asked, and Xion pounced. The two of them clashed, and Xigbar hit the ground. Xion panted for breath, Keyblade in hand. Then, she spoke.

“I’m sorry, Axel. I can’t be in the Organisation—I can’t be by Roxas’ side—any longer.”

“Are you serious?” I can’t judge what I should do in a split second.

“Please, just turn a blind eye... There’s no longer any other way. Look...” Xion slowly pulled her hood down. Axel’s breath caught. Standing there, just like he’d seen before, was—Sora. “Please Axel... protect Roxas.”

“But... you—” His words wouldn’t come out. Of course, I don’t know what I should do. And, I don’t know what I have to do to be able to protect Roxas.

“Please!” Xion said, sounding as if she would cry any minute, and Axel dropped his head. “Thank you, Axel.”

Xion—Sora smiled, and pulled his hood up again.

“...Xion,” Axel called, but Xion didn’t turn around. He simply stepped into a corridor of darkness.

xxx

His chest fluttering somehow, he couldn’t settle down. No one had come to the clock tower. *It’s not rare for no one to come. But it makes me really uneasy.*

Xion definitely did say “I’ll talk to you later” this morning. I thought that meant if I waited here she’d come, which is why I came.

I wanted Xion and Axel to deny my idea that the Organisation wants me destroyed. To say there’s no way that could be true.

Not just that. I actually brought the winner stick, today...

Wanting very badly to meet Xion or Axel, Roxas opened a dark corridor to return to the castle in a slight hurry. Waiting on the clock tower made his uneasiness multiply, and he didn’t know what else to do.

Maybe something happened to Axel and Xion that made them have to go back to the castle first. And, I wanted to talk to Xion, just a little. Xion is probably hiding something from me.

Halfway down the hallway to Xion’s room—were Saïx, Axel, and Xigbar.

“What were you trying to pull, Axel,” said Saïx.

“The old man here misunderstood, I didn’t let anyone go. It was a simple escape,” replied Axel, eyes averted.

Let go...? Who?

“It was my mistake. You can blame me for that,” Xigbar said, in a leisurely manner.

“...Did something happen?” Roxas found himself asking, and all three looked at him at once.

There was silence—Roxas felt uncomfortable. Then he noticed that Xion wasn’t there.

“Even with this one here left, it’s meaningless,” Saïx spat, and left.

Saïx’ words—so the Organisation really was trying to get me destroyed after all? “Where’s Xion?” Roxas asked Axel. Axel’s eyes stayed averted, and he didn’t say anything. Why won’t you say anything, Axel?

After a small laugh, Xigbar answered in Axel’s place. “Gone. Red-head over there let her go,” he said, pointing at Axel.

Xion is gone...? Axel let her go...? “What’s he saying, Axel!” Roxas pressed. Axel

didn't even twitch to look at Roxas.

"While she escaped, he just sat there sucking his thumb, as they say. I'm going back to my room," was all Xigbar said, and he left briskly.

Roxas and Axel were the only two left.

A crushingly heavy silence passed between them.

"What happened?" Roxas asked.

Axel shook his head. "Nothing... really..."

The response wasn't like Axel at all. It made Roxas even more irritated.

"Nothing, you say! Xion's gone, there's no way it can be nothing!"

"It's just like Xigbar said. I sucked my thumb and watched Xion run away," said Axel, finally looking at Roxas.

"I heard that, which is why I'm asking you why!" Roxas shouted. *I don't understand what Axel means—what he did.*

"Xion is a mirror that reflects you," Axel said, quietly.

"I don't understand what you mean."

"Xion is a doll that copies your abilities," Axel said, slowly.

"What are you saying? There's no way Xion's a doll or anything like that."

Axel shook his head quietly. "Xion's a mirror of you. But, the you she was reflecting started not being you."

I don't understand what he means. Xion's a doll? There's no way Xion is a doll. Mirror? What's a mirror got to do with anything?

"Of course not!" he found himself yelling. "Xion's Xion, that's why!" *Xion's Xion, not me. It's so obvious.*

"No, not that... Someday, the mirror had to be broken."

"You mean, destroy Xion?" Roxas asked, punching to the point in one blow, irritated by Axel's roundabout way of talking. Axel wasn't able to answer.

"Answer me!" Roxas shouted, kicking the wall.

"If it wasn't broken, someday you—Roxas, you would stop being you," Axel

said, quietly despite everything.

“I’m me! Your best friend, just the same as always! And Xion is our important best friend, too!” Roxas shouted. But Axel shook his head.

“No, not that... That’s not what I’m talking about, Roxas.”

Roxas kicked the wall again. “Enough.” He started walking. *There’s no point talking to Axel any more.*

Inside his pocket was—the winner stick. The present he’d planned to give to Axel.

“Roxas...!”

He didn’t turn at the call. He was at the point where he didn’t want to turn to anyone’s call.

xxx

Xion jumped out of a dark corridor, landing in Hollow Bastion. Standing there, just as if he’d been waiting, was—

“Riku...!”

“Did you find your answer?” he asked kindly, and Xion nodded.

“Yes, I did. If things go on like this, I’ll lose even those things precious to me. So —” Xion hung her head for a moment, then looked up at Riku. “Riku, please tell me what I have to do from here.” *It’s okay. I won’t tremble now. I want to protect Roxas as long as I can. So, if I return to Sora, Sora’s memories will surely return, and Roxas should be able to be with Axel. If only I go away—surely.*

“There’s a girl named Naminé in Twilight Town,” Riku said.

“Nami...né? What’s she like?” *I know Twilight Town very well, but I don’t know that girl.*

“You’ll find out when you meet her. It should be easy to find her.”

“Got it. Thank you, Riku.” *I don’t know what he means by easy to find, but if Riku says so, I’m sure I’ll meet her right away.*

Xion opened another dark corridor beside her.

And then she said, “Goodbye—”

Ahead lay Twilight Town. The usual town. The place she loved.

xxx

I can't sleep. Roxas sat on his bed, staring at a point on the floor. After what happened last night, I went to Xion's room. She wasn't there. I went to Twilight Town again. She wasn't there, of course. I went everywhere I could. But I didn't find her.

I came back to the castle, with nothing else I could do. I thought I could get a bit of sleep, but I can't. It will be morning soon.

Irritated, angry, alone, he'd punched his pillow. He'd swung his Keyblade about.

I don't know what's happening.

And then there are Axel's words. Mirror, doll, I'll stop being me. I don't understand what he meant. All I understand is that Xion has left the Organisation again, that's it. She went to all the trouble of coming back, so why did she have to go again? Did she lie when she said she wanted the three of us to be together?

I ask myself why, but the truth is, I already know. I do know. I just don't want to know. I know there's no way Axel would bother to tell such a confusing lie. Xion is a mirror that reflects me. But, what does that mean? What does it mean will happen after this?

Well, I know. It's definitely because of what was happening. The more power Xion got, the weaker I got. That's why Xion pulled out of the Organisation. She was putting distance between us—without even telling me.

It's because I understand this that I'm so irritated. Because I don't know what to do. I don't know... I don't even want to know...

xxx

It should be fine like this. I'm sure it wasn't wrong.

Axel lay on top of his bed, trying to persuade himself. *But, I get the feeling that I'm not really accepting the choice I made,* he thought, chest clenching. Roxas or

Xion, I can't make that choice. But, I had to choose one. Then Xion took herself out. Even so, I don't think the situation will change all that dramatically. It just means Xion won't absorb any more power from Roxas, that's all.

That will lead to a slight delay in the plan, which is progressing. That's all. But now, even that very slight delay will hold off Roxas stopping being himself.

I don't know how things will go from here. But I was glad to get just this little amount of time to think.

What do I have to do?

What should I do?

He thought—and didn't sleep.

xxx

All the remaining members gathered in the Round Room. On his way to the lobby, Roxas has received the order to gather at the Round Room.

This will probably be the same kind of meeting we had last time Xion left, thought Roxas, waiting in silence with his head down for Xemnas to appear.

Axel, and all the other members too, waited for Xemnas in silence.

The air wavered. Xemnas appeared. Roxas didn't look up.

"Xion has vanished yet again," Xemnas said.

I know. I heard that yesterday.

"Do we know where to?" Xaldin asked.

But, without giving Xaldin a clear answer, Xemnas continued speaking. "Xion is a mere Replica—nothing more than a doll."

"A doll? What do you mean?" Luxord asked, this time.

"A doll is a doll," replied Saïx in Xemnas' place.

Doll... There's no way Xion's a doll. There's no way a doll could laugh like that, get mad like that, he thought—and then he remembered: Nobodies don't have hearts. *We don't have hearts, but me and her laugh and get angry and stuff. Axel told me that our memories make us do that. Really...? But I thought me and*

Xion didn't have memories...

"It's the Replica project," stated Xigbar.

Demyx tilted his head. "What's that?"

Roxas had taken it for granted that all the other members apart from himself had known the truth. But, it seemed that wasn't so.

"I'm asking you to give a more detailed explanation of the Replica project," Xaldin said to Xemnas.

All the members' eyes were trained on Xemnas.

"It is a plan to copy the abilities of the Keyblade Wielders by using fragments of memory, and make it ours. It was one of the projects we had going at Castle Oblivion. However, the project was forced to undergo huge changes thanks to Vexen's annihilation."

Everyone was quietly listening to Xemnas' words. *Why is everyone staying silent? Doll, memory fragments, copy? How can anyone just swallow this all of a sudden. Maybe I'm the only one who didn't know.*

Axel seemed to be listening, eyes closed and arms folded. Roxas remembered what Axel had said to him the day before.

Xion is a doll that copies your abilities.

The things Xemnas is saying and Axel's words overlap.

"We did not predict Vexen's annihilation—and on top of that, it was not part of our plan for the Replica in question... Xion, to gain a will."

Once Xemnas had stopped speaking, Saix opened his mouth to continue. "To begin with, we never received information from Castle Oblivion that the Replicas could gain a will of their own. Did we, Axel."

Axel didn't show any sign of reaction to the call.

Then, did he know about Xion this whole time...?

Roxas stared at the silent Axel. But Axel didn't move even in the slightest.

"Whatever the doll does, it won't have much impact on our plans. However—this does not mean we can leave Xion, who knows our secrets, at large."

At Xemnas' words, Roxas found himself leaning out and asking, "What does that—"

"Axel," Xemnas interrupted, without even looking at Roxas. Axel finally opened his eyes, and stared at Xemnas. "You absolutely must capture and bring back Xion. It's your responsibility, as the one who let it escape. I don't care how much you damage it—as long as it is alive enough to function."

That's terrible, thought Roxas. Axel didn't say anything.

"Bring back a deserter?! They should be destroyed!" Xaldin shouted.

"It's not a deserter. It's a broken doll for research purposes," Saïx countered, and Xaldin glared.

"Okay, Axel?" Xemnas said, speaking Axel's name aloud again to remind him.

Just a tiny bit, Roxas expected Axel to rebel against the order... but, Axel stayed silent, simply looking at Xemnas.

"Dismissed," said Xemnas, and he disappeared. Axel was looking at the empty chair he'd left behind. Roxas thought he looked like he was thinking something.

That order—you don't plan to listen to it, do you?

"How soft of them to want it brought back... too soft." Xaldin disappeared in succession.

"So that Xion was a doll...," Demyx said. "Did you know, Roxas?"

Roxas shook his head.

"Nothing is let known to those at the bottom... perhaps," Luxord said, as if answering Demyx, and then he disappeared. Demyx shrugged in response, and followed.

"Far out... This has gone and turned into such a pain in the ass." Xigbar also disappeared.

The only ones left were Roxas, Axel, and Saïx.

"Axel, those orders are absolute," Saïx reminded, and Axel's mouth twisted up just a fraction. It looked a lot like a smile. Then, without saying a thing, he disappeared.

I want to talk to Axel. But—I wonder what to say. And then... I really can't believe that Xion is a doll.

“What’s wrong, Roxas. Hurry up and head off on your mission. Does that doll really weigh so much on your mind?”

Roxas glared at Saïx. “Xion—is not a doll.”

Saïx blew out a breathy chuckle. It was the first time Roxas had seen him laugh.

“A doll wouldn’t be added to the Organisation. Look how many seats are here—we’ve always been thirteen.”

Roxas looked around the Round Room. *Thirteen chairs in total. When Xion first came here, all the seats were filled. And Xion—never sat here. That’s...*

Saïx vanished.

Struck dumb, Roxas stared alone into the centre of the room. He remembered the day Xion had stood there.

I definitely want to talk to Axel. I have to. Because we’re best friends.

xxx

I’m thinking. I have to think. About what I should do. Walking at quite a pace down the hallway, Axel headed for the lobby. *I’ve been thinking for so long about what I should do.*

“Axel!” came a call, and Axel turned. Breathing harshly as if he’d chased after Axel desperately, was Roxas.

Axel looked at Roxas wordlessly. He didn’t know what to say.

I won’t try to do anything bad, so trust me? What is ‘trust’ in the first place, anyway. I could laugh at myself right now, for at a loss like this.

Roxas looked down. “...Maybe it would be better if Xion didn’t come back to the Organisation anymore,” said Roxas in a small, lost voice.

That’s the answer Roxas had come to—the same answer Axel had come to at that critical moment yesterday. But, the situation had changed. *I promised Xion. I should keep that promise, for sure.*

Xion’s true wish—and Roxas’ wish—is for the three of us to be together. That

wish isn't something I can grant, not anymore. So, I want to at least keep the promise I made. Axel looked at Roxas, still expressionless.

“Are you really going to... listen to Xemnas’ order?” Roxas said, head still bowed.

Axel gave a small sigh. “If I don’t then next I’ll be the one getting annihilated,” he said.

That’s the truth that’s shoved in my face right now. Is there a way to protect Roxas even with me destroyed?

“Then—at least, can you try to bring her back unharmed...”

“That depends on Xion, you know,” Axel said, sighing heavily. And then... “Roxas.” Roxas looked up at him. “Xion is dangerous.”

“Dangerous...?” Roxas repeated. *Even having known her for so long, Roxas doesn’t really understand Xion.*

“Has your strength gone back to normal?”

Roxas shook his head. “Not yet...” Then, Roxas suddenly looked up, as if he’d realised something. “...How long have you known about Xion?”

I was a little afraid of being asked that. It’s a question I had hoped he wouldn’t think to ask. It’s a question that if he knew the answer to, I thought surely Roxas would reject me.

“By any chance, did you know about Xion since ages ago and hid it from me?!”

I can’t answer, thought Axel. *And even if Roxas rejects me, I still want to protect him. I promised Xion, after all.*

No matter how much I have to damage Xion, no matter how different Xion and my methods might become, I will protect Roxas.

Axel turned his back on Roxas, and walked away.

xxx

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Chapter 7: Breakout

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xxx

Roxas swung his Keyblade. *It can't go on like this. I really want to talk to Xion.*

Heading out to look for her, he'd ended up at Agrabah. He defeated every Heartless he could get his hands on. He fought alone.

Everything sucks. I can't trust anyone, and I don't want to. Axel probably knew about Xion since ages ago. He didn't deny it. He knew, but he didn't tell me a thing. Why—why didn't he tell me, I wonder.

Because he would have been in trouble if I'd known?

Roxas travelled deeper into the magic cavern, defeating Heartless as he went. This was a place he'd come to with Xion before.

It was like Xion 'remembered' something here.

Now, there was a strange machine that had been left in the middle of the room.

Roxas looked up at the device. "...What is this?"

Just then, Heartless appeared, surrounding the device. They moved to box Roxas in, and Roxas swung his Keyblade, almost just waving it about.

He was out of breath.

The Heartless disappeared as hearts floated up.

The floating hearts gather at Kingdom Hearts. But I don't give a stuff about that any more. I have no idea what the Organisation is trying to do, and I don't want to know.

Not only the Organisation. I don't know what Axel and Xion are thinking either.

But, the biggest thing I don't understand is me, obeying an Organisation like this. Why am I an Organisation member? I became a member of the Organisation because I am a special Nobody. So do all special Nobodies have to become Organisation members? Isn't there any other way? What is a Nobody, anyway? Who am I?

Roxas kept on swinging his Keyblade.

xxx

"Are the devices working properly?" Xemnas asked Saïx. The two of them were the only ones sitting in the Round Room.

"Yes. Luxord and Demyx already installed the devices on each world before Roxas went to them."

Devices that collect the scattered memories—at first, I doubted whether such a thing would really work. Devices that collect the memories of 'him' that lie on worlds all over the place.

But, I don't really understand why Xemnas is having the devices installed. Xemnas once said that they are to supplement the memories, so that Xion—or Roxas for that matter—will become complete.

I understand the reasoning that if one becomes complete, then they will be able to collect more hearts. But, is that really so? I don't know Xemnas' true goal.

"It is necessary for either Xion or Sora to be in our hands. Don't forget that."

Saïx nodded, and a smile slowly spread on Xemnas' face.

Saïx didn't know the meaning of that smile.

xxx

The time is near.

Riku stood alone in Twilight Town—in the forest in front of the haunted mansion. He had waited in silence for this time, keeping his breathing in check.

He took off the blindfold that covered his vision. And just like that his figure became that of another man—the being ‘that went as’ Ansem.

Riku pulled his hood right up over his face, and kicked off the ground.

Jumping through the trees, he swung his blade—the Soul Eater.

It's fine, it will definitely be fine.

I've been searching all this time for a way to get along with the darkness inside myself. If I don't put all my effort into holding it down, it will swallow me easily.

The darkness nesting inside my heart is Ansem, but it is also my own. But, is there really any human who doesn't have darkness in their heart?

For Sora to have a Nobody, doesn't that mean that even he had a dark part inside his heart? The Princesses are special because they don't have darkness in their hearts. Then, other than the Princesses, every single person is getting along with darkness inside themselves.

The way to get along with the darkness—the way to hold down the darkness.

Even when I pretend I don't see the darkness inside myself, it can't be helped. If I face the darkness inside myself—the ugliness—I'll get power for sure.

It's okay if I make use of Ansem's power, nesting inside my body.

The time for the fight is near. If I don't make that power my own, there's no way I'll beat him. I don't know if I even really have to beat him. But, everything is for Sora's sake...

Just then, there was a presence in the forest. A special presence. Riku landed, waiting for the owner of the presence.

The person who showed up was his special companion. Their silhouette, even wearing the same Organisation coat as him, was different to any other, and he knew who it was right away. He was the King—Mickey Mouse.

Facing Mickey, Riku slowly pushed the hood back. The moment Mickey saw the face peering from the hood, he took a defensive stance. But, without panicking, Riku once more covered his vision with the blindfold he'd removed. His figure turned from Ansem back to normal.

“Riku...! I missed you!”

Mickey ran up to him.

“Your Majesty,” Riku said, feeling his heart fill up with something a little warm. It was his treasured friend, who he had parted with about one year ago, almost escaping.

“I worried about you all this time,” Mickey said, looking up at Riku. “What have you been up to since then?”

“This whole time, I’ve been looking for a way to overcome my darkness, and waiting for Sora to wake up.” *I wanted to do something about the darkness inside myself before Sora woke up. I can’t make it disappear, so I wanted to at least control the darkness with my own will.*

“The way you looked, just now...,” said Mickey, sounding uneasy.

It’s only natural that he’d worry, seeing the figure of me surrendered heart and body to Ansem.

“I’m fine, don’t worry about me. I’m grabbing at ways to control the darkness, like just now,” he said, looking at Mickey.

“...Has there by any chance been some kind of problem in restoring Sora’s memories?”

Riku gave a small nod. *You don’t have to worry about me.* He’d understood the true meaning behind Riku’s words right away.

“The reason those guy’s movements have been quiet since the battle at Castle Oblivion isn’t because they lost members and got weaker. Them scattering Sora’s memories at Castle Oblivion was nothing but a level of preparation, right to the end. As we waited for Sora’s memories to be restored, they needed time to absorb those memories.”

“I’ve certainly been checking up on the Organisation’s movements too, but there hasn’t been much noticeable movement. If anything, it’s like they’ve been trying to buy time, isn’t it...?”

“Yes—their goal was Sora’s memories. They’ve used the time up until now for absorbing Sora’s memories.” *What does the Organisation want from absorbing*

Sora's memories? I still don't know their true goal. All I know is their means of absorbing those memories. Xion. And Xion is—a girl special to Roxas, so she's also a girl special to Sora. That's what reflecting Sora's memories means. Riku continued speaking. "Thanks to them, the restoration of Sora's memories is hardly progressing at all. It's because they've stolen Sora's memories of Kairi, which are very important to him."

Mickey looked down for a moment, then he looked up at Riku. "I'll go with you, and help you take back Sora's memories!"

But, Riku shook his head. "Leave that to me, your Majesty—ah, Mickey. Instead... there's something I want you to do," Riku said, quietly.

"Something you want me to do?"

"After this, I'll have to fight an Organisation member. I might lose, and maybe, I might be swallowed by the darkness." I'm uneasy. The day I'll have to fight an Organisation member—probably Roxas—is approaching. But, I really don't think Sora's Nobody Roxas will be all that easy for me to defeat. I'll have to release some power hidden inside me in order to win. But there's nothing else but to release the darkness inside me.

And, Riku still didn't have the confidence that he couldn't be swallowed by that darkness.

Riku gazed steadily at Mickey. "If I am, then... you'll be the only one who can guide Sora, and... Donald and Goofy."

"Riku..."

I don't know whether DiZ is an enemy or an ally. I still can't guess what he'll do once Sora wakes up. "Please, Mickey. Once Sora and the others have woken up, I want you to help them." *I want the strength of someone who can help Sora to not be persuaded by DiZ.*

Riku gazed steadily at Mickey.

"I understand, Riku." The King—Mickey—gave a big nod.

xxx

Xion—and, the Replica project.

Roxas tossed and turned in bed. He hadn't slept well today, either. But, his sleeplessness today was different from up until yesterday. He felt as if he was recovering well from his fatigue, and his strength was returning.

Roxas stared vaguely at the white ceiling.

I couldn't believe that Xion was a doll created to copy my power, and I didn't want to believe it. But now, I understand a little. In these three days since Xion left the Organisation, I feel like my power is coming back. If my power is coming back because she's not by my side, then the explanation sticks. But I don't want to just swallow it.

Xion left the Organisation. And, Axel didn't stop her. Axel knew the secret of Xion's abilities since way before, and hit it from me. I feel like both Axel and Xion betrayed me.

He thought of Xion.

Xigbar said that Xion and I are special Nobodies. But, Xion is a Replica doll. Then, what the hell am I? If we're the same, then I'm a Replica doll too.

You and Xion are connected by 'Sora'.

That's what Xemnas said. What is 'Sora'? Are Xion and I different? Whose Nobody am I? Who am I?

Roxas sat up slowly, and stared at the palm of his hand. *Then, maybe Axel would know—like he knew about Xion. I guess I'll know if I try asking him. But—what if he lies to me again? I...*

Roxas got out of bed, and left the room.

xxx

The situation has started to change, but I don't know what action I should take. I'm stuck.

Feeling impatient, Axel walked down the hallway, heading to the lobby.

"...Axel."

Axel's feet stopped. He'd never heard a voice so tormented.

He turned, and shrugged. "Hey, Roxas." He put on a smile, and Roxas bowed

his head. *These past few days, we've argued every time we've met. Every day Roxas' expression gets darker. Just like he has a heart,* Axel thought, for some reason calm.

"...Did you find Xion?" Roxas asked, head still down.

"I wouldn't find her that easily now, would I?" he answered, stating the obvious.

"I guess you're right...", said Roxas, faintly.

This conversation was missing the real matter—Questioning like he's judging the right distance to come at me. Axel waited for him to continue. *I know Roxas has so many things he wants to ask—to know. I can't answer everything, but I want to answer as much as I can,* Axel thought.

Roxas looked up at him. "Did you know about Xion—from the start?"

I don't plan to lie any more. All that's left are the things I can't say, and the things I don't know either.

"...Not from the start."

"From when?" Roxas questioned further.

"Well... I forget when," he said in his usual tone, scratching his head.

Roxas smiled slightly. "Get at least that sort of thing memorised," he said.

That's my favourite saying.

Silence flowed between them again.

"Axel... Who am I?"

That's the thing Roxas most wanted to ask. But even so, I don't know how best to answer that. Axel looked at Roxas. *His eyes are looking right at me. I don't plan to lie.*

But...

"Xion and I are special Nobodies. But, the Organisation was trying to destroy me—weren't they?" Roxas continued.

Axel nodded. "Yeah, that's right."

“Xion had copied my power—the power of the Keyblade, so they didn’t need me anymore, right?” Roxas spat.

Axel was unable to answer.

“...You wanted that too, right?”

Axel’s chest tightened painfully. Enough that he couldn’t breathe, breath plugged in his throat. *I didn’t... want that. I would never want that.*

“You’re wrong. We’re—best friends,” were the words that tumbled automatically out of his mouth.

Roxas shook his head violently. “...If we’re best friends, then tell me what you know, Axel!”

He grabbed Axel’s coat.

Roxas is angry, Axel thought, quietly. For him to get angry like this, it looks like Roxas really does have a heart. And, for that to be all I’m thinking at a time like this, I really mustn’t have a heart.

“Who am I?!” Roxas yelled. Axel just looked at him. “Xemnas said that Xion and I are connected by ‘Sora’! What is Sora! Am I the same as Xion too?!”

Sora—yeah, the Keyblade Hero is at the start of everything. The things I did in that Castle Oblivion—the things I’ve done up until now... maybe everything was a mistake.

Axel shook his head. “You and Xion are different.”

“Then—” Roxas went to keep asking, but Axel interrupted.

“For your own sake, it isn’t best for you to know the truth.”

“And why do you get to decide that!” Roxas hand let go of Axel’s coat, and clenched in his own hair instead. “I want to know about myself! Why am I here? What is special about me? Why can I use the Keyblade? How can you say I’m not allowed to know about myself!”

Ah, Roxas looks like he’s going to cry any moment now. “Roxas...,” Axel called, but Roxas shook his head quietly.

“Tell me, Axel... Who am I?”

But, I can't answer. I don't know how to answer. Should I tell him outright that he's Sora's Nobody? Then maybe Roxas will choose the same path as Xion, and throw away the Organisation. Then that will mean breaking my promise with Xion, and over everything else I've done, I'd never be forgiven for that.

But—I know. I understand. It's all already too late.

"Just trust me, Roxas," Axel pleaded.

"I can't... trust you anymore." Roxas gazed right at Axel. There was no more anger and no more sadness in his expression.

"Roxas," Axel called, but Roxas turned his back on Axel, as if rejecting it.

"I want to know about myself. I want to know who I am—why I was born. To know that, I'd..."

Roxas started walking. To his back, rejecting everything, Axel couldn't find the words to call out.

xxx

We're best friends. What do those words even mean, I wonder. Roxas walked. There are only two things I want before I leave the Organisation. My memories with Xion.

Roxas returned to his room, opened the drawer of his bedside table, and took out a shell. *A thalassa shell—the shell for the keepsake charm.*

Rolling around deeper in the drawer was a stick.

Roxas thrust the shell into his pocket, and picked the stick up between his fingers. 'Winner' was written on the stick.

It's the 'winner' stick, that I was going to use proudly someday when the three of us wanted to eat ice cream. But now I don't need it anymore.

"I—I want to know about myself," Roxas muttered in a small voice, and gripped the ice cream stick.

Then he thrust the stick into his pocket too, and left the room.

xxx

The castle was in an uproar. Correspondence had already reached Saïx that

Roxas was attacking the dusks inside the castle. The order given to the dusks, to capture Roxas, had already changed.

Escape and the like—how stupid.

Now that Xion is gone, if we lose Roxas we will be in a fix. I've already received orders from Xemnas in regard to this. It is necessary to prevent Roxas' escape.

"Saïx."

A voice called out to stop Saïx, on his way to the entrance to the castle.

I'd anticipated that this might happen. "I don't actually have a moment. Is this urgent business, Axel?"

"I just want a little time," Axel said, sounding lost.

"What do you mean?"

"I can definitely get her back. So..."

"You want me to make allowances for this traitor," he shot back, and Axel's face twisted.

"I'm going. By the way, sheer force will do absolutely nothing, you know that, right? Which means there's no way you'll be able to stop him."

Saïx started walking. *It's my memories that are telling me this sort of thing is unpleasant.*

xxx

And so, on the floor near the castle entrance, Saïx waited for Roxas.

It's been a while since I fought anyone. I can sense the fight coming closer.

Saïx welcomed Roxas with claymore in hand.

"We can't have you just leaving whenever you like," Saïx declared, and Roxas readied his Keyblade.

"I have nothing to say to you."

"Then let's skip the conversation," said Saïx, and just like that he threw his claymore. But, Roxas batted it aside easily. The series of movements was like it was done by a completely different person than yesterday's Roxas.

Saïx hesitated for a second, and Roxas ran at him.

He blocked the Keyblade.

Long ago—I remember, I didn't hate fighting. Saïx flung his claymore at Roxas.

And so, Saïx remembered things from a long long time ago.

xxx

Saïx fell to his knees.

“Ugh... I still don't have enough power. Kingdom Hearts, give me power...,”
Saïx groaned.

Roxas started walking, back to Saïx. He went down the stairs, and opened the door—and there was the neon city.

He'd chosen to leave through this way instead of a dark corridor because he'd thought it was fit for an escapee. And, standing there was someone who understood very well how he thought.

“So you've decided?” Axel said.

“I want to know why the Keyblade chose me,” Roxas replied, without even stopping. *I won't get angry like before, not any more. I've steeled myself for this.*

“You're going against the Organisation?! If you become their enemy, they won't leave you alive!!” Axel yelled.

It's a complete role reversal from just before, thought Roxas, with a thin smile.

He stopped walking.

“No one would be sad.”

He kept walking.

Above his head was the heart-shaped moon—Kingdom Hearts.

I still don't know where I should go now. But, all I know is that I can't be here.

“I'm... sad,” Axel murmured in a small voice, but it didn't reach Roxas.

xxx

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Chapter 8: 358 Days

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xxx

She sat on the other side of the white table, the hood of her black coat pulled right up.

Naminé gazed steadily at her. *I knew we'd end up meeting someday. That's because she's a part of Sora, and I know what choice Sora himself would make in this situation. Like the time he thrust the Keyblade into his own chest, it's the type of choice Sora would definitely make.*

Naminé put on the best smile she could, and spoke. "I wanted to meet you, Xion."

Xion took her hood off. And there—was the face of the doll known as Xion.

"Naminé, can you see my face?"

Naminé nodded. She could definitely see the face of 'Xion'.

"What should I do?"

"What do you want to do, Xion?" Naminé returned.

Oh yeah... Our names are similar, aren't they? Shio-no-on, the sound of the tide, and Nami-no-ne, the sound of the waves... Both are connected to that blue ocean, Kairi.

Naminé waited for Xion's answer.

I know her gaze is captured by the picture on the wall. The picture of the three in the black coats.

Xion stared at them in silence for a while, then spoke. "In the beginning, I

thought I wanted to be with Axel and Roxas forever. But now, my memories... no, they aren't my memories, are they?" Xion said, her gaze wandering.

"You aren't Sora or Roxas. You're Kairi from Sora's memories," Naminé answered.

Xion's gaze fell as she thought a little.

I think the meaning of my words reached her... Certainly, Xion's memories belong to Sora, but Xion herself reflects Kairi. And because there were memories of the girl Sora treasures, Kairi, inside Roxas, Xion became... the girl treasured by Roxas.

Xion began to speak. "As I remembered things, I realised I have to go back to where I came from." For a moment Xion looked down, as if searching for words. Then, she leaned forwards over the table and asked, "What should I do to go back?"

"...Return to Sora, right?"

Xion nodded. "If the memories are returned to Sora, you'll disappear. You didn't have any memories of your own to begin with, and so, those memories are what now connect you to everyone in their place. Which means, once you've disappeared, no one will be able to remember you," said Naminé, choosing her words slowly.

Incorporeal Xion can't exist without those memories. If those memories are gone, she'll return to being a doll without even a face. And, the doll won't remain in anyone's memories. That's where the Replica of Riku was different. Riku Replica was a doll that copied memories completely, and Xion is a doll that absorbs memories. That's the difference. Once the memories Xion absorbed go back to where they came from, everyone's memories related to her will be like they never happened.

"Even with my power, the fragments of memory that are called 'you' cannot stay connected."

Xion was looking straight at Naminé. *Her gaze is just like Sora's,* thought Naminé. *The straight, unwavering eyes of a hero.*

"I'm ready. But, I don't know what I need to do. That's why I came to see you."

Xion blew out a little sigh. “Really, Roxas has to return with me, doesn’t he?” Xion looked down, as if that was her only worry. “But... I think would still be too hard for Roxas, right now. Because he still can’t feel Sora—and so, Naminé, once I’ve disappeared, please... look after Roxas.”

So, she thinks that if Roxas were only able to feel Sora, then he’d make the same choice as her? But, that wouldn’t be like Sora, thought Naminé. Sora walks the path he believes is right, even if he has to fight against fate. That’s Sora’s strength. Sora will say when bad things are bad.

It’s just like Xion reflects only Sora’s good parts. And, perhaps Roxas holds the childish parts deep inside Sora’s chest, thought Naminé, of the boy she still hadn’t met.

“I’ve asked others to take care of Roxas, too,” Xion said. “I can’t... protect him.”

“I understand,” Naminé replied, and she nodded sharply.

“Thank you...”

Just like the time I promised Riku I’d protect Sora, I really want to protect Roxas too, ‘from my heart’. “Well then, let’s go—to Sora,” Naminé said, with a smile.

Just then. The air in the room wavered. A dark corridor had opened. DiZ appeared.

“Naminé, you can’t! The Organisation has found us! They’re coming here!” he shouted, glaring at Xion. “The doll led them here! This is what you get for trusting a marionette on strings...!”

“I’ll do something!” Xion answered, without even getting timid at DiZ’ words. She stood up, and flew out of the room.

“Wait! Xion!”

Naminé’s voice didn’t reach her.

Xxx

I thought I knew everything about Twilight Town, but I’ve never set foot here. The Haunted Mansion—a place shut behind hard gates.

Axel emerged slowly from the forest, heading for it.

“How... did you know I was here?” Xion asked, standing in front of the gates. Her shape was properly Xion, and Axel was slightly relieved.

“In return, why are you here, Xion?”

“Because... Riku told me that if I returned to Twilight Town, I’d find out where I should go,” Xion answered, looking down.

Twilight Town is a special town. Close to the In-between of the realms, it’s a true town of twilight. And, generally people don’t exist there.

The reason the three of us were always in Twilight Town was because it felt comfortable. Home is where the heart is, and all that. Close to the darkness and far from the light. That kind of place.

I wonder why I never thought the inside of the Haunted Mansion was mysterious until now. Now that I think about it, if anything, that place is more interesting. The worlds are moving, wriggling. I’ll bet there are people other than us who ‘felt’ that they had better come to this place. And, I don’t know why we ‘felt’ it. Maybe I’m turning into one of those people affected by the Hero too, thought Axel, with a faint smile. And then, shaking his head, he said, “I’m always the one with the icky jobs...”

“Axel...,” Xion called, just like always, even though her voice was small.

“Xion, what do you think you’re going to do?”

“I’m just going to return to where I ought to,” Xion replied, clearly.

“In the beginning, I thought that was best too. But it’s depressing, you know. I can’t swallow it, there has to be something.”

“But this is for everyone’s sake.”

Everyone...? Who do you mean by everyone? Us? Or others?

“Don’t say selfish crap like that. Every last one of...”

“This is for the best,” Xion said.

I hate that sort of thing. There’s no such thing as ‘this is for the best’. There’s, I want to, and I don’t want to, that’s all. I learned that in my human time.

“You’ll be destroyed, you know that, right?” *To be accurate—she’ll disappear.*

But, Xion readied the Keyblade. “...No holding back now, Axel.”

“Don’t mess around!” Axel yelled. *Me, hold back, she says? This late in the game?* “You...! Don’t treat me like a joke!” Axel wrapped his hand in flames and made his chakrams appear. “I’ve decided! No matter how many times you guys run away I’ll bring you back, no matter how many times it takes!” he wished—he shouted, he wailed, he vowed.

I’ll bring them back no matter how many times it takes. No matter how many times. For my own sake, for your sakes. No matter how strong Xion tries to make her power, I don’t think I’ll lose. Because, I’m strong.

Axel kicked off the ground, wrapping his body in flames. He threw a chakram which Xion deflected. The chakram back in his hand, Axel shortened the distance between him and Xion in one move. Then he brought it down. Xion caught and blocked it.

“Axel—please.”

“No ‘please’.”

“But... I...” For a second, Axel thought he saw Xion’s face become Sora’s again. He shook his head slowly. “You get it, don’t you, Axel? I can’t live like this.”

“There should be a way for you to keep living as yourself.”

Xion pushed Axel back with the Keyblade, jumped back, and readied her stance.

“That’s a lie. On top of this, I don’t want to be used by the Organisation for such a thing. I hate that Roxas is being used by the Organisation.”

“So do I.”

Axel closed the distance between them again, and encircled the area with flames. Xion clasped her hands to her chest, as if trying to protect herself from the fire. Then, shaking it off, she plunged at Axel’s chest.

“Understand me!”

The Keyblade swung down at Axel’s shoulder. He cried out. *I really don’t want*

to do this.

“...I’m telling you, I don’t! Enough is enough!”

Still with the Keyblade pressing into him, Axel cut at Xion with a chakram. Just like that, Xion was sent flying to the side.

“Axel...!”

“Every last one of you stubborn assholes are pissing me off!”

“Please... Axel, understand.” Xion stood up again.

Maybe we could be called equal. And both of us have reasons we can’t lose here.

“I... I wanted the three of us to be together!” Axel yelled, and Xion hit the ground.

I thought too hard about what to do and confused myself. I didn’t have the courage to chase after Roxas. Was it because I was afraid to turn against the Organisation? No. The truth is, it’s because more than anyone else—more than Roxas, more than Xion, I wanted the three of us to be together.

To suit the Organisation, to suit Xion, to suit Roxas—to suit the world. I don’t give a crap about any of that any more. I use the Organisation for myself. That hasn’t changed from the start. All that’s changed is for whose sake I do it for. Maybe he’d call it being a traitor. But, the world changes.

I wanted the three of us to be together. I wanted the three of us to laugh together in the Organisation. Pretending to be adults, they decided it can’t be like that. But I’ll put an end to it—I’ll have them stop.

“...Axel...”

But, Xion stood for the third time.

The winner was...

xxx

“...You’re so irresponsible...,” Axel muttered, walking on unsteady legs with her—the doll—over his shoulder.

Axel is probably rather wounded. And she seems to have completely lost

consciousness. I really didn't think that Xion would lose to Axel the way she is now, but maybe that's the strength of those touched by the Hero, thought Xemnas. In other words, the depth of one's connection to the Hero will emerge in battle just like that.

If there is a way for those without hearts—Nobodies—to gain hearts, perhaps their connection to Sora—the Keyblade Hero—is some kind of start. The special Nobody, and the doll. And then, the Nobody who went and had deep contact with them. There's no reason changes wouldn't emerge. And, it wasn't the doll that gained the most power.

Reaching the castle, Axel collapsed with Xion still in his arms. Xemnas, who had watched over it, picked Xion up.

If that means her power won't cut it, then we'll make her stronger. Right now, we need either of them in my hands. I'll make Roxas and Xion merge together, it doesn't matter which is left. And then, in the end, I should even get Kingdom Hearts.

Xemnas disappeared from that place.

xxx

Where am I?

Ah, I'm in the same pod I was put in before. This isn't a Sora dream, is it? Hey, why am I sleeping in a place like this?

That's right—I lost to Axel. Why wouldn't he let me escape? I wanted the three of us to be together, but wasn't Axel the one who said it was impossible? Why would he say something like that?

Oh, yeah... Because Axel is a Nobody. Maybe that's why he said it. He doesn't have a heart, so maybe that's why he wasn't able to say he wanted the three of us to be together.

Who's looking at me from outside the pod? Xemnas? What does Xemnas want with me?

"With this, you'll be complete," Xemnas said.

Complete... What does that mean? I feel like I'm going to be sick. Something's

flowing sharply through me. I can't breathe properly. These are Sora's memories. The memories are giving me power. But, I don't want this power. But, I don't want Xemnas to have his way.

I'm sorry, Axel. But I—definitely don't want to dance on Xemnas' strings. I'll surely have a moment's chance. Xemnas has to be off guard sometime. And then, I'll go see Roxas again. And then, I'll tell him how things truly are. But—it really would have been nice if the three of us could always be together. I'm sorry, Roxas. Axel. Nobodies are not allowed to exist. And, just like them, I am not allowed to exist either. I have to return to the place I ought to be. Because I am Sora. Because there's no way I want to dance on Xemnas' strings.

xxx

He was at the usual spot—on top of the clock tower. The beautiful sunset looked just as usual.

I didn't know where to go. I didn't know what to do, either. "Haha...," Roxas laughed, dryly, and then hung his head.

I pulled out of the Organisation because I wanted to know the meaning of my existence. Now that I've left the Organisation, what should I do—why was I born, where am I going? I pulled out because there was no reason to stay, but now somehow I don't really understand the reason I thought it would be better to leave.

And, I didn't know where to go, so I came here.

Sensing a sudden waver, Roxas looked up. Standing there was—a girl, with her black hood pulled right up, Xion.

"Xion?!"

Xion sat down beside him, and silently offered Roxas an ice cream.

"Thank you," he said, taking it and bringing it to his mouth. It was sweet and salty and cold. *I wonder how many ice creams I've eaten here since I joined the Organisation?*

Glancing over at Xion, who was also eating an ice cream, Roxas brought his ice cream to his mouth again. *I don't know what to say. I wonder if Xion already*

knows that I left the Organisation. And, I wonder why Xion is keeping her hood up? Xion left the Organisation too, didn't she. Maybe she came here with no place to go, just like me—No, I really don't think so.

Think while you eat ice cream, and you stop tasting the flavour. His ice cream disappeared, bit by bit. The stick he could see inside, just like always, had nothing written on it. *I have so many heartfelt regrets about the Organisation—about Axel, but now, more than anything, I think back to that “winner” stick. Why didn't I give it to him that whole time? I wish I'd given it to him sooner.*

Then, his ice cream was gone. He looked to the side, and saw that Xion had also finished her ice cream.

By and by, Xion placed the stick quietly beside herself.

“Right about now, I have to settle this.”

Xion stood—and put her hood down. The person who appeared from under the hood was not Xion. Roxas couldn't speak. His breath caught.

The figure that appeared was that of a brown-haired, blue-eyed boy—*He looks a little, a little like me*, thought Roxas.

Then, Xion slowly began to speak. “My power will soon be made complete. Like water overflowing from a vessel, my memories are brimming with what I received from you, Roxas.”

I don't really understand what Xion is saying. It's making me remember Axel's words. Xion's memories—are from me? I don't know what to say. And, I don't know what's happening to Xion.

“How do I look to you now, Roxas? If you see another boy's face, it means I'm about to reach completion as a doll.”

Xion is—No. This isn't Xion. But it's Xion. This is—what the hell? Back turned to Roxas, Xion stepped off the clock tower and walked over the nothingness. Roxas couldn't follow. And then Xion turned.

“Roxas—This is Sora.”

Sora. This is Sora.

“Now, I have to swallow you in too, Roxas. That's the reason I was born...!”

Xion's coat was thrown aside. And there, revealed, was—a doll.

This is Xion's true form— No, it's a lie. That's—that's.

The doll held out a hand and opened a corridor of darkness there, and it swallowed everything around, including Roxas.

xxx

We reached Wonderland. And, I'm not me anymore.

Xion stood in front of a device in the middle of the room.

This is—a device the Organisation installed to collect fragments of Sora's memory. By gaining the fragments of memory, my power is amplified. And, I have faith. That Roxas will defeat me. Because there's no longer any other path to take.

"Xion!" Roxas yelled.

"Why—Why!"

Roxas needs more time. But, there's no more time left for that. I'm sure Roxas wouldn't fight me. So, I have to go seriously. Maybe on the way, I'll stop being me. But, even so, I have faith. Because I have faith if anyone can defeat me—the fake me—it's Roxas.

xxx

No. I don't want to fight. But Xion is attacking me seriously.

In a room in Wonderland, the doll that was Xion sent Roxas flying.

I did it because I had to—Axel said that, didn't he? But, even so, I don't want to fight. I'll run. But Xion chases me. What should I—how should I.

Xion said she'd swallow me in. Really? Why? What would happen to me if I was swallowed? Maybe I'd rather be swallowed.

Roxas blocked an attack with his Keyblade. As the Keyblade rebounded, it hit Xion's body.

Please, Roxas...

I thought I heard Xion's voice just now. And then, she opened a corridor of

darkness again. This time it led to—*This place. The place where I fought Xion when I was tricked by the Organisation's order.*

There was a device in the middle of this area, too. In front of the device, Xion's shape changed. *What the hell are those things?*

I know that for every second I hesitate, Xion gets stronger and stronger. Xion's attacks slash the strength of my whole body. If things go on like this—I'm done for. Is fighting the only option?

I'm lost. But, there's no way I'm letting myself be destroyed. Because, I want to know about myself. And, that means finding out about Xion, too. Roxas steadied his breathing. *The only way left is to do it—*

That moment, Xion opened a corridor of darkness again, and it wrapped around Roxas too. This time they were in Agrabah. In the middle of the room was another strange device. In front of it, Xion's power increased even more, and her form changed.

I've—made up my mind. Because, there's definitely the future. Because maybe I can make Xion stop.

Roxas readied his Keyblade, and ran at Xion. He swung the Keyblade down. He felt the impact. And then, Xion opened another corridor of darkness. This time, Roxas thought he saw Xion's figure on the other side of the darkness of the In-between. But—on the other side of the darkness, standing with its' back to the setting sun, was a giant doll.

In front of their usual spot, the giant doll swung its' arms down, and Roxas was sent flying.

I don't want to think that's Xion. I could even think that this thing stole Xion, maybe. Xion—I. I just want to eat ice cream together again.

Roxas stood up, and hit out at the doll—at Xion.

I hate this. But, because maybe we can eat ice cream together again. Because I have no intention of delivering a final blow. Xion. Let's eat ice cream together again. Axel. You better treat me with the winner stick.

Something is hurting. And—along the way, he got confused. I don't know. I

don't know why I don't know.

His head hurt. Everything was fuzzy. He wobbled. *Who am I fighting? What am I doing? Who am I, again? I'm Roxas. Organisation's Number XIII. This is Twilight Town, at the plaza in front of the station. In front of the usual clock tower. And you, here in front of me—that girl on her knees, looking like she'll faint any moment.*

"Who... are you?" *A black-haired girl, wearing the same coat as me.* "It feels like this should be really important, but I can't remember."

The girl opened her closed eyes, and spoke. "You're better off like that, Roxas."

Roxas caught her body as she crumpled. *Why has she fallen? She looks pained.* He raised her.

"...Did I hurt you?"

Everything is horribly fuzzy. I don't really understand. Light began to drift up from the girl's body. *This light...*

"No... I'm making myself disappear. Because I definitely didn't want Xemnas to get his way." She laid her hand over Roxas'. "I'm just returning to Sora—to where I should." She closed her eyes for a moment, then spoke. Her voice was breaking up, and hard to hear. "But... I have one... wish... Free the hearts I captured... Kingdom Hearts..."

"Free... Kingdom Hearts?" Roxas repeated. *Kingdom Hearts... Why? My job is to collect the hearts from Heartless.*

Cold light began to shoot from the girl's body, starting at her feet, changing into something. "Because... I can't do it any more... Kingdom Hearts... Don't let Xemnas have his way..."

The girl looks like she'll fade away at any moment now, thought Roxas. Why... why is this painful, somehow? I hate it.

"Goodbye, Roxas. Let's meet again." A small smile rose on the girl's face.

I'm—definitely forgetting something terribly important here.

The girl reached out a hand, and stroked his cheek. "I'm glad I met you... No, you and Axel. You two are my best friends. Please don't forget just that part."

Us two are her best friends—best friends? Something terribly important—Twilight Town, the clock tower—the usual spot. Here there was Axel, and—who?

The hand stroking his face dropped. “No... Xion.” *I remember. I remember Xion. I wouldn’t forget. The sunset, the ice cream, there’s no way I’d forget. “Let’s eat ice cream again, the three of us.”*

Xion shook her head quietly, and—closed her eyes.

“Xion...!” Roxas yelled. But, in Roxas’ arms, Xion’s figure became light and disappeared. In the end, a thalassa shell was all that remained.

My face is wet. I... I.

The setting sun sank. Roxas gripped the shell that had been left behind.

xxx

She sat on the other side of the white table, the hood of her black coat pulled right up.

Naminé gazed steadily at her. *I knew we’d end up meeting someday. That’s because she’s a part of Sora, and I know what choice Sora himself would make in this situation. Like the time he thrust the Keyblade into his own chest, it’s the type of choice Sora would definitely make.*

xxx

He woke just like always, on the same bed as always.

My body hurts all over for some reason. Wait, why does my body hurt all over like this? My head is fuzzy. And heavy.

Axel turned his head from side to side, and slowly sat up in bed.

“Why do I...”

Why do I get the feeling that I’m forgetting something terribly important? It feels like there’s a gaping hole broken into me. Yeah—I’m lonely, he thought, and at that moment, he noticed a white envelope left beside his bed.

Written on it in messy handwriting was his name, and the name of his important best friend.

Right—that's right, Roxas left the Organisation. Maybe I had forgotten.

Axel picked up the envelope. He didn't say he'd left this.

He opened the envelope, and inside was just one stick. An ice cream stick. And, written on it, was "winner".

"...Roxas—" Axel muttered, the name of his best friend.

xxx

Xion.

Xion.

Xion.

Xion—Xion... Xion, Xion, XionXionXionXionXionXionXion.

He muttered the name over and over, feeling like he'd forget her if he didn't.

Xion.

My best friend. The girl I treasure. Xion.

Roxas ran.

Xion told me to free Kingdom Hearts. That was Xion's wish. Then I want to grant Xion's wish. Because maybe, if I do, I might be able to see Xion again. My treasured best friend that I destroyed with this hand of mine.

To free Kingdom Hearts, I have to go to Xemnas. I have to return to the Organisation's castle.

Roxas slipped out of a dark corridor.

Rain was falling.

This is the first time... it's rained in this world.

Even through the rain, the light of Kingdom Hearts radiated in the sky.

I'll free the hearts from that Kingdom Hearts. And then Xion—I'll take Xion back. We'll eat ice cream together again.

He ran though the neon-lined streets he'd passed through only a little while before. Dusks—Nobodies—attacked him.

“You’re in my way!” Roxas yelled, making Keyblades appear in his hands. Two blades. *One of these is Xion’s.* The Keyblades glowed, and changed form. But, Roxas didn’t care anymore. He swung the Keyblades. *I don’t have time to fight you.*

He repeated that name once more.

Xion.

Now, Heartless appeared. They surrounded him. Roxas routed them, panting hard.

He repeated that name again.

Xion.

Just then, Roxas noticed the shadow of someone waiting for him. On top of a sky scraper—a black coat. *He’s clearly got his eye on me. But he’s not a member of the Organisation.*

Roxas ran up the skyscraper. They passed each other. Just then, Xion’s Keyblade flew out of his hand. He didn’t understand what had happened in that moment. It had felt like the Keyblade had jumped out of his hand on its’ own.

The man took the Keyblade.

That guy—

He landed on the ground again. And then, he faced the man. He had silver hair, and a blindfold was wrapped around him

“Who are you?!” Roxas yelled.

“It doesn’t matter who I am—I have use for you,” the man said.

“Why are you getting in my way!” *I’m pissed off. I don’t have time to fight you. I have to grant that girl’s wish—Xion, that’s right. And then everything will go back to normal. There’s no time. While I do this, I feel like I’m going to forget.*

Xion... Xion—Xion. He repeated it. *I don’t want to forget, but I think I’m going to.*

“You see, you’re someone who affects Sora’s memories.”

“Sora?! Again with Sora!” Roxas answered. *He’s saying the same thing as*

Xemnas. I get the feeling that girl—Xion said so too.

“What are you going to do now?” the man asked in a calm tone. His calmness sickened Roxas.

“I’m going to free Kingdom Hearts! And then everything will go back to normal! Then... I’ll get to be with that person again!”

Yeah—the three of us will eat ice cream again. We’ll watch the sunset from the top of the clock tower. Then, we can even go to the beach. It will definitely be fine. The three of us can spend that same time again. Definitely. Hey, Xion, that’s right, isn’t it?

“Xion...? Soon enough we won’t be able to remember that name, but—now, I can’t let you do anything reckless.”

The man still has Xion’s Keyblade. But something is wrong about that.

And then—Roxas readied his Keyblade again.

“I’ll free Kingdom Hearts, and go to Sora! If I do, then Xion will, everything will go back to normal!” he reminded himself once more, and ran at the man.

“What you’re thinking isn’t going to happen if you go making contact with Kingdom Hearts without a plan. You’ll just be destroyed by the Organisation!”

“Shut up!” Then tell me what else I should do!

Roxas swung the Keyblade down, beating at the Keyblade Riku held as he blocked.

I don’t think I’ll lose. I can’t lose to this guy.

They exchanged blows over and over. They ran around the skyscraper.

Xion.

It’s okay. I still remember. Because I remember the days we laughed and ate ice cream, the three of us.

He batted the man aside, and he crashed into a wall.

I won. I knew I wouldn’t lose.

“Why! Why do you have the Keyblade?!” the man yelled, on his knees.

“Who the hell knows!”

I don't know what he means. I'm the one who wants to know why I was able to get the Keyblade, and also, why Xion could use the Keyblade same as me. And why you can use Xion's Keyblade. Why did Xion's Keyblade fly out of my hand?

The man stood up, took Xion's Keyblade in his hand, and heaved it upwards.

Why couldn't I dodge that? It full on hit me. I think I passed out for a moment. Just then, the scene from on top of the clock tower flitted through his mind. He hit the ground, flat on his back. *But, I won't forget. I don't want to forget.*

Xion. Axel. Sea salt ice cream. The usual spot. The clock tower. The sunset. My treasured friends. The promise we made for our next day off.

I can't forget. I absolutely—do not want to forget. I'll free Kingdom Hearts, and everything will go back to normal.

I don't want to forget—

xxx

Riku walked slowly over to Roxas, who had finally fallen, stabbed the Keyblade in his hand into the ground, and furtively studied the other boy.

How did Roxas get two Keyblades? And why did he let go of one of them in the middle of the fight? There are so many things I don't understand. The Keyblade he let go of seemed to jump into my hand like it was being sucked there. And, in that instant, I remembered her. I hadn't even remembered her name up until then—

I'm still not convinced that he's really Sora's Nobody. It feels like—I get the feeling that his face is somehow like Sora's, but I don't really know.

Suddenly, Roxas sat up, grabbed the Keyblade that was stabbed into the ground, and slashed at Riku. Having been on his guard, Riku jumped back quickly.

“Give it up!” Roxas yelled.

In that instant—a memory floated up inside Riku. *It's a gamble.*

“What's wrong, Sora? Over already? How weak.”

The words echoed inside Roxas. “What—but you're the one who's losing...”

The words that came from his mouth were the same ones Sora had said, once.

I can't believe it, but—I have no choice but to believe it.

“You really are his Nobody after all—I guess I have no choice but to trust DiZ.”

“What do you mean by ‘his’! I am me! Me!” Roxas yelled in grief, and slashed at Riku. He was so close, there was no time to dodge. Riku caught the blow full on.

Just then—a voice echoed inside his head.

Riku, please! Stop Roxas!

It was the voice of a girl who was already fading from his memory.

Roxas looked down at Riku, Keyblade in hand. “No matter how many times you come at me you’ll lose!”

Everything—is for Sora.

“Maybe you’re right—Looks like I have to do it.”

“What?!”

Riku stood slowly, and removed his blindfold.

“The power dwelling in my heart—the power I’m suppressing with the strength of my heart. Even if I stop being me...”

The next moment, his body got lighter. *Giving my body over to the power of darkness means even my shape will change.*

Behind Riku rose a shadow that may as well have been called darkness itself. And then, Riku himself became that of Ansem’s form.

I feel the power flooding through me. This is the power of darkness—but, I’m controlling it. It’s under my own will. I won’t be imprisoned by the darkness, because there is light in darkness, and its’ brilliance increases too.

Riku closed the distance between them in one move, and grabbed Roxas. The Keyblades fell from Roxas’ hands.

“This is the power of darkness,” Riku said, looking down at him.

And then, there—Roxas crumpled.

Riku pulled his hood right up, and gazed down at the fallen Roxas.

“...Roxas, is it.” *Oh yeah—what was that girl’s name again?*

The rain fell harder.

Riku sensed something waver, and DiZ appeared there.

“He felt Sora,” said Riku.

“He even said he hated Sora, didn’t he? What a joke. Emotions and the like don’t exist for Nobodies.”

“If he’d met Sora—maybe it would have been different,” Riku responded, looking at Roxas’ back.

On his back—the rain poured.

xxx

Roxas, don’t be sad.

I was born from you and Sora.

I am you, I am Sora.

The memories of me haven’t disappeared

They have become one with yours,

And returned to Sora.

xxx

In a town wrapped in sunset, in a little house, in a little room, a boy woke up.

“Another dream about him—”

I’ve been dreaming a lot lately. I don’t remember precise details about the contents of the dreams.

The boy sat up in bed, opened the window, and watched a train run through the town.

I always see this view— The boy stared for a while, idly. For some reason, I feel weird today. Maybe it’s because the holidays are going to end soon? Even just thinking about how to spend the remainder of the summer holiday is pretty fun.

The boy got out of bed, changed, and ran to the town.

He thought as he climbed the hill, heading for the usual spot. The boy's name was Roxas. And the name of this town was Twilight Town. Everyone was going to meet up at the usual spot.

Oh yeah...

"We still haven't all gone to the beach together, have we?" Roxas murmured, running up the hill.

Today—That's right, today let's promise to go to the beach together.

xxx

My summer holiday will end in seven days...

xxx

Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days: Vol 3. Xion—Seven Days is complete, so is the Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days series! Continue to the [Afterword by author Kanemaki Tomoco](#)

Afterword

Written by: Kanemaki Tomoco

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xxx

For the 14th book, the first afterword! I'm Tomoko Kanemaki. Thank you very much for reading 'Kingdom Hearts 358/2 Days'. To both those who have always read my books, and to those who haven't, I truly thank you.

The 14th book... yes, this is already the 14th volume in the Kingdom Hearts Novel Series. And, 14 is also the number that Xion was charged with. Moreover, just as this is the first afterword in the KH Novel Series, 'Days' was the first game title I had helped write a scenario for. I think it was about two years ago that we worked on that scenario, re-writing it over and over. Those days have already become a fond memory.

I remember happily the days when all the new staff at Square Enix's Shinjuku office had very long conferences with Tetsuya Nomura. That time, he usually came once or twice a week. Most of the discussion was during meetings amongst Yukari Ishii of the scenario team, and the reliable supervisor, Daisuke Watanabe, and myself. Well, we really did talk about many different things. Mr. Nomura looked at the discussions the three of us had, and produced. Mr. Nomura added his hand and created more things, and that's the shape that production took as it went along. I had been involved in game development before that, however, these jobs were all on visual novel type games, and this was the first RPG I'd helped produce. I'd usually worked alone over everything else, and so working in a team in itself was also something I was able to enjoy.

Out of the things we discussed in relation to the premise, the number one impressive thing was the premise related to Xion.

I was the one who put forward the premise of Xion, and very much of what I discussed and decided was adopted. This includes her name, which I thought about deeply. It's already touched upon in the Ultimania, but Xion's name corresponds to Naminé (波音, 'the sound of waves') as Shion (潮音, 'the sound of the tide'), as well as being an anagram of X and 'the Number that Never Was', the imaginary number No. i. Then there's one more thing. The flower *Aster tataricus* ['shion' in Japanese] means 'I won't forget you' [in Japanese floriography].

Furthermore, Xion's hair colour was also a request of mine. It came from my private desire, "I want to see Mr. Nomura make a girl with black hair!". It was nothing other than a perk of the job. I am treasuring a rough sketch of Xion that (probably) hasn't been shown to the public.

Moreover, the base of the Replica premise of mine was also adopted. It was an idea that came from a thought I'd had when I was writing Riku's volume of the Chain of Memories novels, that the Replica's weren't actually counted. Beings whose existence has been created, that are supposed to exist even less than the beings that aren't supposed to exist. The premise is one that cannot but end sadly no matter how you handle it, but I think it's so if the Replicas are feeling happiness in their hearts at the end, even after all that.

Still, just as the game itself is a long series, the novels have also become a long series. Volume 1 came out about six years ago, you see. The first volume, for which I was groping in the dark in every conceivable meaning, holds incredibly fond memories. And then, in those six years, so many things have happened. A child entering elementary school at that time would be a middle school student this spring! Wahh. I have so many feelings of gratitude towards everyone who has supported me for those six years, and to all the staff.

I don't usually have the opportunity to say this properly, so here are some more concrete words of thanks.

First, to director Tetsuya Nomura. The signed Sora figure I received on a birthday sometime ago has been treasured in front of my desk the whole time. I'm your fan. We haven't met recently, but I really enjoyed idling and talking with you backstage at the game show. I'd like the two of us to talk backstage again sometime. And, I thank you in advance for taking care of me from now on, too!

To illustrator Shiro Amano. While we're always promising to go do things together, one of us is always cancelling at the last minute because of work... we're terrible, aren't we? That time we drank ourselves stupid at my house was funny, wasn't it! Someday let's drink to a level where we don't fall down!

To scenario writer Kazushige Nojima. If I think calmly, you're a storyteller I admire so much. In KH2, that line of the King's, 'We're safe and sound—and free to choose! So there's no reason we shouldn't choose to help our friends,' is a line I really, really love, and I want to become the kind of person who can write lines like that. Though there's no real reason we should have, the two of us haven't properly drunk together face to face. After I have finished this afterword, I'll email you an invite to come out drinking with me.

To the same man who supervised the scenario as well as the CoM novels, Daisuke Watanabe. Right from the beginning, if you and I hadn't been friends, Watanabe, I don't think I would have been let to write for this series. Even so, you and I have become old friends, Watanabe. I remember fondly the time when you'd come drinking with me every night. And, congratulations on your marriage! The wedding is almost exactly one month after this novel goes on sale, isn't it! I can't wait for the wedding.

To the woman who wrote the scenario with me, planner Yukari Ishida. I regret that in the end we had say 'let's finish this', and couldn't realise what we wanted to. I miss you Yukarin, I miss you. Let's relax and eat something tasty, and have that girl talk we couldn't really do while we were flapping around working. Don't work yourself too hard, you hear me!

To Square Enix's original planner, Minori Miura. My first impression of Kingdom Hearts was a game from the development team you were in. For something like this to have happened, life truly is strange. You were the one who introduced Watanabe to me, Minorin, and that's why I am where I am today. Good luck with your new life!

To designer Kouichi Watanabe. About thirteen years have passed since we met. I definitely didn't think we'd come to meet again in a place like this. Thank you so much for your designs, which are always lovely.

To the editor in chief Takeshi Aoshima. Not many people get to make 14 books

together... If it weren't for you, Mr Aoshima, I absolutely positively wouldn't have been able to continue writing. I'm sorry for being such a nuisance all the time. Thank you so much. Within my working life, you're in the top three I'm indebted to. And, I truly thank you in advance for taking care of me from now on, too.

I still have heartfelt words of thanks from many other staff members. I truly truly thank everyone not just to those in book making, but everyone involved in 'Kingdom Hearts', the wonderful game, and its world. I kind of feel that Mr. Walt Disney is included in that 'everyone'... No, I definitely want to include him! Thank you for King Mickey! I love him! And lastly, to all my readers. Thank you so, so much. Without the support of your love, I couldn't have made it this far. This afterword might seem as if the series is ending, but, I'm still going to write! Terra! Ven! Aqua! Connected hearts are my strength. I'm selfishly saying that I'm connected to you all. Those who want to connect even more, if you search for me on Twitter, I'm sure we can make real bonds!

So, let's meet again in Kingdom Hearts Novels: Birth by Sleep!

-On a cool, rainy spring day